University of Alberta

Ascending the Canadian Stage: Dance and Cultural Identity in the Indian Diaspora

by

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Abstract

This thesis investigates Bharatanatyam (South Indian classical dance) in Canada, with a focus on *arangetram* (ceremonial debut dance recital). It contextualizes historical perspectives on Bharatanatyam, examining the ideological background from which diasporic practice developed. I discuss diaspora theory to investigate and problematize the notion of hybridity, and explore how assignations of difference play into the construction of ethnicized and gendered identity among Bharatanatyam students. By examining how performance is integral to social relations concurrently played out during the *arangetram* event, I explore how the cultural capital of Bharatanatyam is used to articulate social exchanges and reinforce the upper-middle class affiliation of the participants, and how the social capital of displaying status through *arangetram* performances sustains hierarchies based on wealth within the Indo-Canadian community. This research provides insights into the function of traditionalism in minority communities and how this relates to changes in the social function of expressive culture in Canada.

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ASCENDING THE CANADIAN STAGE: DANCE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE INDIAN DIASPORA

Meera Varghese

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to investigate the current practice of Bharatanatyam (a South Indian classical dance form) in Canada. Specifically, I examine how the practice of *arangetram* (a ceremonial debut dance recital) contributes to the construction of social and cultural identity among Bharatanatyam students training in the Indian diaspora.

Canadian multicultural policy has allowed diverse cultural traditions to thrive, making Canada a site in which individuals within immigrant communities can use artistic practices as a means for constructing diasporic identity. With the adoption of the Multiculturalism Act by the Canadian parliament in July 1988, Canada became the first country to pass a national law aiming "to assist in the preservation of culture and language, to reduce discrimination, to enhance cultural awareness and understanding, and to promote culturally sensitive institutional change at the federal level."[1] In this study, I examine how diasporic artistic practices contribute to sustaining ethnicized identity among second-generation youth and first-generation immigrant parents. This can be experienced through the formation of cultural associations as well as transmission and public performance of traditional artistic practices. I also examine the function of dance as a gendered art form in relation to the emphasis placed upon girls to be the bearers of cultural traditions within diasporic communities.

Milton Singer's consideration of "cultural performance" encompasses religious, ritualistic, and artistic practices in the experience of people living in India.[2]

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[1] Dewing 2006, pp. 6-7
[2] Singer 1972, p. 71

Within the context of the Indian diaspora in Canada, cultural performance functions as a means for establishing an Indian community in which social actors signify and sustain their collective position within the host society. This perpetuates the identification of an upper-middle class Indian community with artistic practices in the diaspora as a continuation of patterns developing out of nationalist trends in India following independence in the mid-20th century.

Bharatanatyam embodies art, culture, religion, philosophy and history in India, and has largely come to be considered iconic of Indian national identity. Following the Indian independence movement, Bharatanatyam in its current form gained recognition as a national art form, and flourished throughout the upper and middle classes in India during the latter part of the twentieth century. Since Bharatanatyam originated as a form of worship in Hindu temples around the 2nd century AD, Hindu themes are prevalent and the majority of compositions and dance dramas depict scenes drawn from the great epics of Hindu literature—the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. As such, Bharatanatyam has come to occupy a place of central importance among Indians living in Canada. Many first-generation immigrants strongly urge their children—predominantly, their daughters—to take up Bharatanatyam in an attempt to encourage a connection to their Indian heritage.

Arangetram literally translates as "ascending the stage," and refers to a ceremonial debut solo recital in which the dancer—accompanied by live musicians or pre-recorded music—presents a complete set of dance compositions from a canon of standardized Bharatanatyam repertoire. In order to complete an *arangetram*, a dancer must be well versed in all technical and expressive elements of Bharatanatyam, and

have extensive knowledge of dance theory and *Karnatik*, or South Indian classical music. Traditionally, a dancer must train for several years without ever performing publicly; *arangetram* signifies a dancer's first public presentation. The performance serves as a public validation ceremony, not only for the student and teacher, but also for the family of a dancer. The completion of *arangetram* carries with it a distinct level of accomplishment and status within South Asian communities in the diaspora. Although *arangetram* is a deeply-rooted traditional practice, the relocation of Indian communities has prompted various changes in dance transmission and performance over the past three decades of Bharatanatyam practice in Canada.

During the course of fieldwork recently completed in Vancouver and Toronto, I have conducted extensive interviews with Bharatanatyam students and their instructors, as well as their families, in order to examine how identity can be sustained or negotiated through the execution and performance of *arangetram*. For a number of families, the long-term goal of completing an *arangetram* begins with the students' initiation into Bharatanatyam lessons—most often encouraged by their parents' motivation for them to perform for cultural events within regional Indo-Canadian communities. Throughout the process of learning dance, Bharatanatyam students inevitably find themselves also receiving an education in Indian culture through exposure to music, language, dance theory, history and religious themes in the dance compositions—an education that is often not received in the home environment. Once *arangetram* preparation begins, the dancer's experience expands beyond the dance studio to encompass the involvement of her family in the planning of the event. The performance itself draws in members of the Indo-Canadian

community, who participate in the event as spectators. Through examination of discourse among students, teachers, and parents in each of these successive stages, I explore how *arangetram* plays a part in defining cultural identity, maintaining performance traditions, articulating social relations and symbolizing status within Indo-Canadian communities.

I bring a unique perspective to this area of study because I am an Indo-Canadian Bharatanatyam performer, choreographer and instructor. I was born and raised in Canada, but have received advanced Bharatanatyam training in India over the past several years. This background in Bharatanatyam has provided me with an insider's perspective and allowed room for participant-observation throughout my research. I draw from my own experiences teaching Canadian students, and also incorporate some limited comparison of Canadian Bharatanatyam practice with modern practice in India.

Bharatanatyam has gained considerable attention among dance scholars and theorists. Common topics of past research in this area include historical development of Bharatanatyam, interpretations of dance theory and treatises, and the evolution of teaching and performance in the diaspora (Kersenbloom 1987; Naimpally 1988; Meduri 1996; Allen 1997; Petievich 1999; Shah 2002; Purecha 2003; Gaston 2005; O'Shea 2007). In my own research, I examine *arangetram* drawing on current ethnomusicological analytical approaches, and address issues of music and globalization, music and diaspora, studies of identity and ethnicity, and the role of performance in constructing culture. I also analyse *arangetram* as a dance

performance study, a method previously used by noted ethnomusicologists in the context of music performance (Qureshi 1986; Sugarman 1997).

In my first chapter, "Historical Perspectives on Bharatanatyam," I contextualize the history of Bharatanatyam in order to shed light on the ideological background from which Indian diasporic practices have developed. I outline historical perspectives on the social position of *devadasis* (female dancers dedicated to Hindu temple) and hereditary court musicians within the context of colonial annexation, social reform and the anti-*nautch* movement. I also consider the factors motivating Indian nationalists and dance revivalists such as Rukmini Devi, in the appropriation of *devadasi* dance from the temple to the concert stage through the creation of the reconstructed dance that is currently known as Bharatanatyam. Finally, I examine the practice of *arangetram* as a part of the transmission process, and explore how the training of Bharatanatyam teachers and the establishment of Bharatanatyam schools in India have influenced the development of Bharatanatyam transmission in the Indian diaspora.

I examine diasporic dance practices in my second chapter, "Bharatanatyam Practice in Canada," outlining the establishment of Canadian Bharatanatyam institutions by three prominent figures: Menaka Thakkar in Toronto, Lata Pada in Mississauga, and Jai Govinda in Vancouver. Engaging with ethnographic material from my field interviews with instructors, students and parents, I examine various motivating factors for pursuing Bharatanatyam training in Canada, and explore perspectives on maintaining tradition in dance transmission and authenticity in performance. In contemplating the future of Bharatanatyam practice in Canada, I

consider the availability of performance opportunities for Indo-Canadian dancers, as well as the practicality of continuing with the demands of Bharatanatyam performance when young dancers grow and pursue other career goals.

I then discuss the practice of *arangetram* in Canada and explore changes in the significance of the ceremony within the diaspora. I examine the commercialization of the *arangetram* as a large scale and often costly social event—a common trend in the Indian diaspora. In addition to the cultural capital that knowledge of Bharatanatyam can provide, I explore the business of *arangetram* as a public display of wealth—a social status marker—to examine if this plays a larger role in promoting the practice of *arangetram* amongst Indo-Canadian families. Finally, I present a case study of the *arangetram* of Vidya Kotamraju, a Bharatanatyam student training at the Jai Govinda Dance Academy in Vancouver. I follow Vidya through the process of planning the social aspects of the event as well as the preparation and rehearsal for the performance. I return to the actual *arangetram* event in the fifth chapter.

I engage with diaspora theory in my third chapter, "Dance, Diaspora and Difference: Constructing Indo-Canadian Identity," to explore how assignations of difference play into the construction of identity among second-generation Indian girls attending Bharatanatyam classes. I examine the role of regional Indian cultural associations in providing a social space in which diasporic individuals sustain traditional cultural practices such as Bharatanatyam performances. Through consideration of ethnographic material from my field interviews, I examine the role of Bharatanatyam transmission in providing Indo-Canadian girls with an education in

Hinduism and Indian culture that, in many cases, would not be received elsewhere. I then question the notion of hybridity in constructing Indo-Canadian identity by examining the perspectives of second-generation Indian girls who perform ethnicized Indian identity through their dance performances and who strive to maintain authenticity in their cultural practices. Finally, I examine the ways in which "difference" is constructed and assigned among diasporic individuals and explore the possibility of making a case for a new construction of identity based on "sameness," as inspired by Kofi Agawu (2003).

In my fourth chapter, "Becoming the Goddess: Dance and Embodiment of Feminine Identity," I examine the specific, codified movements of Bharatanatyam derived from dance theory and practice, and explore the ways in which repetition of these actions—through Bharatanatyam transmission and *arangetram* performance—has come to embody a social and physical process whereby gendered identity is articulated among Indo-Canadian girls. Drawing from feminist theory as well as traditional Indian dance treatises, I examine how the theory and practice of Bharatanatyam foster a historical Indian feminine ideal encoded in aesthetics, physicality and behaviour. I also examine ethnographic material, in which Canadian Bharatanatyam students offer perspectives on the process of embodying this feminine ideal through dance.

I return to my case study in the final chapter, "Ascending the Canadian Stage: Vidya's *Arangetram*." Drawing from Christopher Small's approach to "Musicking" (1998), I present a phenomenological account of the *arangetram* from the set-up before the event, through Vidya's backstage preparation and actual dance

performance, to the reception afterwards. Throughout this chapter I explore how the dance performance is integrated with the social interaction of people in attendance, and how the entire event serves social needs for both the dancer and the Indian diaspora community.

In my exploration of Bharatanatyam within the scope of Ethnomusicology, I intend to raise awareness of cultural practices in both the Indo-Canadian community and among the wider Canadian public. By addressing the *arangetram* in a Canadian context, I examine how artistic practices in Indo-Canadian communities may articulate the intersection between the notion of "tradition" and its role in shaping perceived cultural belonging on the one hand, and the transformation of attitudes and social needs in the experience of diasporic Indian communities on the other. It is my aim that this research will provide insight into the function of traditionalism in minority communities and how this relates to changes in the social function of expressive culture in Canada.

CHAPTER 1

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON BHARATANATYAM

1.1 DEVADASIS AND EARLY DANCE PRACTICES

The classical Indian dance currently known as Bharatanatyam is a reconstructed form of early South Indian temple dance. In her book, *Bharata Natyam: From temple to theatre*, Anne-Marie Gaston traces the history of dance in the temples and courts of India. As early as 1500 B.C., dance was mentioned in the *Rg Veda* as a metaphor for dawn: "She [dawn], like a dancer, puts her broidered garments on."[3] The *Manu Smṛti*, a legal text written between the second century B.C. and second century A.D.[4], advises the king: "Gamblers, dancers and singers—let him instantly banish them from his town."[5] However, Gaston notes that, in practice, dancers were generally held in high esteem.[6]

Kalidasa, in his literary works of the fifth century A.D., makes references to dancing in both the temple and the court. Kalidasa's lyric poem, *Meghaduta*, contains a description of temple girls dancing during worship in the Mahakala temple. His play, *Malavikagnimitra*, depicts the King Agnimitra's love for the beautiful dancer and courtesan, Malavika, and includes a scene describing a dance competition between Malavika and another dancer to prove the worth of their respective dance instructors and win the favour of the royal court. Eleventh-century accounts of temple dance practice include both literary works and travel journals. These accounts—along with the writings of French explorer, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, in the seventeenth

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[3] Griffith, Ralph T. H., trans. 1896. *Rig-Veda*
[4] Banerji 1983, p. xiii
[5] *Manu Smṛti* IX. 222, quoted in Gaston 2005, p. 26
[6] Gaston 2005, p. 26-27

century—make reference to the perception and function of dance. Tavernier noted that the ruler of Golkonda (the ancient Deccani kingdom) allegedly supported dance because it encouraged heavy drinking, allowing the king to benefit from taxes on alcohol. There are also references to temple dance practice, not only in Hindu temples, but in Buddhist and Jain places of worship as well.[7]

The dancers in Hindu temples were called *devadasis*, or "servants of God." To become a *devadasi*, a young girl would be married to the temple deity in a formal wedding ceremony, which most often took place before puberty. Once this was completed, the *devadasi* was considered *nitya sumangali*[8], indicating that she could never become a widow. Because of this auspicious role, the *devadasi* was an important presence outside the temple at Hindu marriage ceremonies and processions:

> The beads in [a *devadasi*'s] *tali* (marriage symbol) are considered to bring good luck to women who wear them … some people send the *tali* required for marriage to a *Dasi* who prepares the string for it and attaches to it black beads from her own *tali* … it is believed that *Dasis*, to whom widowhood is unknown, possess the power of warding off the effects of inauspicious omens.[9]

The complete dedication process for a *devadasi* involved six ceremonies: "marriage (*kalyanam*); dedication (*muttirai*); ritual first dance lesson; the presentation of ankle bells (*gejjaipuja*); the debut recital (*arangetram*) after the completion of dance training; and the selection of a patron."[10] Upon completion of these ceremonies, the *devadasi* took up her duties in the temple, performing rituals and dancing. This early form of temple dance was known by various names, including *dasi attam*, *kutu*, and

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[7] Ibid., p. 27-28
[8] ever-auspicious woman, Kersenboom-Story 1987, p. xv
[9] Thurston 1909, quoted in Gaston 2005, p. 32
[10] Gaston 2005, p. 30

most commonly, *sadir*.[11] In describing *sadir* dance, Avanthi Meduri notes that the female dancer was required to perform several different characters and to depict, with stylized gestures, the act of gods and goddesses making love.[12]

Beyond her ritual role in the temple, the *devadasi* also served as a courtesan for upper caste Brahmin men. There was a formal process for selecting a patron, which was often performed by a senior female member of a *devadasi*'s family. Gaston notes that it was not only important for *devadasis* to select patrons of high social and economic status, but it was also considered a punishable offence for a *devadasi* to associate with men of lower castes.[13]

In South India, the connection between dance practice in the royal court and the temples was particularly evident in Tanjore. In the eleventh century, King Rajendra I had four hundred *devadasis* brought to his Brihadisvara temple from surrounding temples. For centuries, the Tanjore court and temples continued to support dance and music practice, making Tanjore a cultural centre in South India. The most notable figures to come out of this tradition were the hereditary poet-musicians of the Tanjore Quartet, who gained the support of the court in the early nineteenth century. The Tanjore Quartet was made up of four brothers: composer and vocalist, Ponniah; composer and violinist, Vadivelu; choreographer, Chinniah; and *mridangist*[14] and *nattuvanar*[15], Sivanandam. They are credited with the development

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[11] Meduri 1996, p. 11
[12] Ibid., p. 72
[13] Gaston 2005, pp. 40-41
[14] *Mridangam* is a double-headed drum from South India, used in *Karnatik* music and accompaniment of South Indian dance forms.
[15] One who recites rhythmic syllables and keeps time with small cymbals during a dance performance. In temple and court dance traditions, the *nattuvanar* also served as a dance teacher.

of dance pedagogy as well as the composition and standardization of extensive dance repertoire.[16] Gaston notes:

> Without patronage, either by rulers or temples, the professional dancers (*devadasis*), dance teachers and musicians could not have developed the art to the high standard that it achieved. The influence of the Tanjore rulers for several centuries was extensive.[17]

1.2 RISE OF MODERN NATION – DEVELOPMENT OF BHARATANATYAM

Colonial annexation of Tanjóre in 1856 caused a significant break in the artistic practices of the courts and temples. Avanthi Meduri describes the drastic effects of this "epochal interruption":

> [The performing arts] were suddenly without the financial and symbolic life support that the royal king had extended as royal patron to deserving poets, dancers and musicians of his kingdom. Royal patronage had, in fact, sustained the production of the arts and had nurtured the lives of musicians and artists for at least three hundred years. Women artists, such as the devadasis and the musical and artistic practices they embodied, were orphaned, and rendered homeless in the year 1856.[18]

Meduri notes that in existing *devadasi* scholarship, ethnographers such as Amrit Srinivasan and Saskia Kersenboom-Story tend to romanticize the *devadasi*, suggesting that she "possessed some kind of special agency prior to the disruptions announced by the master-discourses of colonialism in 1856."[19] This is problematic because it overlooks the social stigma attached to *devadasis* as a result of the difficulty in clearly defining their place in society:

> [The *devadasi*] was always less and more than a simple prostitute, religious artist and or 'chaste' wife. She functioned like a prostitute but was more in that she was bride of god and could trade her sexuality in

[16] Weidman 2006, p. 62
[17] Gaston 2005, p. 29
[18] Meduri 1996, pp. xv-xvi
[19] Ibid., p. 15

> exchange for gifts; was a wife, yet did not possess a mortal husband; and was a mother without being a wife.[20]

The ambiguity of the *devadasis*' role and status within the courts of South India parallels that of the court musicians of North India, as documented by Regula Qureshi:

> ...feudal musicians were not only nurtured. As socially devalued hereditary specialists they were exploited within profoundly unequal relations of patronage ... The social degradation under which hereditary musicians practiced their mastery has continued well past the abolition of feudal courts in independent India.[21]

The colonial response to *devadasi* practice was largely influenced by the tendency to interpret their role in the temple from a Christian perspective, as outlined by Kersenboom-Story:

> The term *devadasi* almost immediately evokes in the western mind an association with the well known phenomenon of the nun. The fact that the *devadasi* were dedicated to a god who resides in a temple calls to mind the nun who is considered to be the bride of Christ. But the other fact that the *devadasi* had children puzzled Western observers and made them ponder for centuries over the delicate issue of celibacy.[22]

In 1892, a social reform initiative called the anti-*nautch*[23] movement was led by colonial missionaries and educated upper-middle classes in Indian society, to end the *devadasi* tradition of temple dancing.[24] This movement specifically aimed to abolish: "1) the dedication rites by which young girls were married to Hindu gods in a sacred thread ceremony known as *talliketu*; 2) the continued practice of ritual dancing in precincts of the Hindu temples."[25]

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[20] Ibid., p. 16-17
[21] Qureshi 2002, p. 86
[22] Kersenboom-Story quoted in Meduri 1996, p. 12
[23] *Nautch* is a corruption of the Hindi word *nach*, which refers to a dance performed in North India by girls of lower class, Srinivasan 1985, p. 1873
[24] Chakravorty 1998, p. 111
[25] Meduri 1996, p. xxi

As noted by Purnima Shah, India's nationalist movement against British rule in the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century "propagated a reassertion of traditional values and the awakening of an awareness for the country's rich cultural heritage in an attempt to reestablish the Indian people's dwindling sense of identity."[26] In order to claim dance as a symbol of national pride, steps were taken by Indian nationalists to elevate the status of dance practices in the eyes of the social elite.

Avanthi Meduri's PhD dissertation contains an extensive discussion of the role played by prominent theosophist, Annie Besant, in the anti-*nautch* discourse of the 1890s. Rather than supporting the propaganda of anti-*nautch* lobbyists, which concentrated on the morality of the *devadasis*' sexuality and perceived position as prostitutes, Besant idealized and romanticized the cultural practices of *devadasis* within the context of Hindu temple worship. As Meduri points out, this selective perception of *devadasi* history was necessary to maintain the religious and cultural practices of the temple[27]:

> A notion of what constitutes a great and authentic civilization was, for better or worse, captured in the spectacle practices of the temple. The Anti-Nautch movement was, in fact, endangering the continuity of all those religious and cultural traditions that had been nurtured thorough the many periods of social and political upheaval in the nation.[28]

In 1911, the colonial government issued an official dispatch "requesting nation wide action to be taken against [*devadasi*] performances."[29] The opposing agendas of

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[26] Shah 2002, p.125
[27] Meduri 1996, pp. 68-69
[28] Ibid., pp. 70-71
[29] Ibid., p. 105

social reformists and dance revivalists further obscured the societal position of the *devadasi*. As Amrit Srinivasan notes:

> Both the reform and revival movements associated with the devadasi and her dance were precipitated by the alien context of understanding within which she was placed. The reformers presented the Hindu temple dancer as a 'prostitute' in order to do away with her; the revivalists presented her as a something of a 'nun' in order to incarnate her afresh. The piecemeal and crude nature of these formulations reflected the primarily pragmatic necessity on which they were based as (official) rhetoric for rival political parties in the Tamil region.[30]

Drawing upon the work of Partha Chatterjee, Pallabi Chakravorty outlines the role of dance in Indian nationalist discourse:

> ...through traditional cultural practice, such as dance and music, the nationalist discourse revived the essential spiritual identity of the East. The sole bearers of this spiritual identity, they proclaimed, were the (upper-middle-class, and upper-caste) Hindu women ... Indian women became symbols of culture and tradition. The revival of classical Indian dance and the construction of Indian womanhood are both reflections of this essential Hindu identity.[31]

It was precisely this ideal that brought Rukmini Devi Arundale, an upper-caste Brahmin Hindu woman closely associated with the Theosophical Society, to the forefront of the dance revival movement. In the 1930s, Rukmini Devi set out to remove dance practice from *devadasis* in the temples and to hand it over to the Brahmin caste for public performance. In order to make the dance suitable, in her mind, for upper caste women, she took steps to reconstruct the dance form, leaving out elements and subject matter that she deemed inappropriate.

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[30] Srinivasan 1985, p. 1875
[31] Chakravorty 2000-2001, p.111-112

Of particular concern for Rukmini Devi was the physical portrayal of sexual intercourse in temple dance compositions based on the *sringara*[32] (erotic) sentiment. She viewed this as an element of dance that needed to be purified and replaced by the sentiment of *bhakti* (devotion) without any sexual reference. She expressed her objection after learning a *padam* (lyrical, expression-based composition) portraying the *sringara* sentiment:

> From one *vidwan* [music master], I learnt the old *padam tamaraksha*. … She [the heroine] describes not only her love but the whole process of physical contact and in gestures at that! To depict such things is unthinkable for me.[33]

Rukmini Devi's perception of appropriate dance repertoire greatly influenced the style and the dance material taught at Kalakshetra, a dance school established in Chennai by Rukmini Devi in 1936.[34] One upper caste male dancer, who trained at Kalakshetra, describes the difference between his style and that of *devadasis*:

> Because they had to attract patrons, their dance was somewhat different from the dance we were taught in the 1940s and 50s at Kalakshetra. We avoided many gestures. I was aware of this. We were told not to use the mouth and lips. Gauri [a *devadasi*] used her mouth.[35]

T. Balasaraswati, a prominent dancer of the Tanjore court style, strongly objected to Rukmini Devi's interpretation of *sringara*, asserting that *bhakti* cannot replace *sringara* because *sringara* **is** *bhakti*:

> *Bharatanatyam* is a form of yoga ("yoking") grounded in *bhakti* … and expressed in the erotic idiom of *sringara*. *Sringara* is *bhakti*-in-dance; there is, and can be no dichotomy between *bhakti* and *sringara*. *Sringara* is not carnal; at the same time, sensuality is not suppressed in

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[32] *Sringara* is one of nine moods, referred to as *navarasa*, which can be depicted in Indian dance, music, drama and art.
[33] Ramnarayan quoted in O'Shea 1998, p. 47
[34] Gaston 2005, p. 81
[35] Ibid., p. 43

> *sringara* but seeks to suggest the sublime; and therefore attempts to "purify" *bharatanatyam* are misguided.[36]

It is important to note the outside influences that informed Rukmini Devi's appropriation of *sadir*—most notably the Christian bias of the Theosophical Society, which led to the idealized "model of the ancient temple dancer as a pure and holy, sexually chaste woman."[37] In addition, Rukmini Devi used her previous experience with ballet in her development of Bharatanatyam exercises and technique. As Janet O'Shea notes: "In the new post-colonial context, ballet became the legitimizing standard while the content and form of bharata natyam were a national ideal."[38] O'Shea also discusses how the revival and appropriation of Bharatanatyam perpetuated the image of the middle-class female dancer as a symbol of tradition and respectability within nationalist discourse:

> When women of 'good families' turned to bharata natyam, they embraced and reformed a feminine practice that, through its performance of tradition and spirituality, could represent symbolic domesticity and, hence, national culture. Elite women recrafted bharata natyam into an emblem of the nation, and subsequently the dance form's new status as a national treasure confirmed the propriety and traditionalism of middle-class girls and women.[39]

In transforming *sadir* into Bharatanatyam, dance revivalists such as Rukmini Devi not only altered the practical elements of the dance, but they also reassigned the dance's social position and perception by removing it from its original context. The hereditary *devadasi* dancers were replaced by members of the social elite, predominantly Brahmin women. The performance space was relocated from the temple to the public theatre stage. In addition, the royal patronage system was

[36] Balasaraswati quoted in O'Shea 1998, p. 48
[37] Srinivasan 1985, p. 1875
[38] O'Shea 1998, p. 54
[39] O'Shea 2007, p. 114

replaced by state patronage.[40] Matthew Harp Allen characterizes this revival process using Richard Schechner's term, "re-storation," as in a "splicing together of selected 'strips' of performative behaviour in a manner that simultaneously creates a new practice and invents an historical one."[41]

Allen also notes a parallel between this "appropriation of a dance art from a hereditary community of artists"[42] and the revival and appropriation of musical practices in North India by V. N. Bhatkande, as documented by Regula Qureshi:

> Initiated and articulated very clearly by Bhatkande, it became the agenda for middle-class Hindu music lovers for a generation: to take music out of the hands of the Muslim hereditary professionals and win it for the Hindu elite through discipleship and devotion.[43]

In the examination of the social reform movement and its impact on the revival and appropriation of classical Indian dance, it is important to consider the influence of European Enlightenment on the Indian nationalist movement, which was predominantly led by Indians of the upper class who received British education and a privileged status over the lower classes in India. Pallabi Chakravorty draws upon the work of Partha Chatterjee to demonstrate how the creation of this "indigenous elite" through intercultural contact during colonialism played a key role in the formation of Indian national ideology:

> Chatterjee shows how 'nationalism' itself, being part and parcel of European discourse, was incorporated into the Third World struggle for self-determination. Thus, Indian leaders, after being exposed to Enlightenment philosophy (by virtue of an English education, which the colonizers saw as necessary for their own administrative purposes),

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[40] Shah 2002, pp. 127-128
[41] Allen 1997, pp. 63-64
[42] Ibid., p. 65
[43] Qureshi 1991, p. 161

> appropriated the ideals of liberty and political equality to achieve independence.[44]

Also inspired by the British Enlightenment was the notion of self-representation through the writing of India's past. While Britain, as much of Europe, "drew its classical past from ancient Greece, the Indian nationalists took the privilege of writing history for explaining its social and cultural formations."[45] For Indian nationalists, this culminated in a search for ancient Sanskrit texts that could be connected to present cultural activity in India. By establishing this connection with the past, Indian nationalists were able to assert a linear Indian cultural history that could be considered untouched by colonialism.[46]

For dance revivalists, the key source that provided this connection was the *Natya Sastra*, a dramaturgy treatise written by the sage, Bharata, between 200 B.C. and 200 A.D., and recovered by the Asiatic Society in the late eighteenth century[47]:

> The recovery of Natyasastra evoked the resurrection of a past that sought to legitimize its cultural classicity, artistic ingenuity, and linguistic virtuosity. Natyasastra allowed the illusion of a continuity with a distanced but idealized past, so that the newly reconstructed version of Bharatanatyam evidenced the notion of perpetuity with the tradition of the treatise itself.[48]

The very fact that the text was written in Sanskrit limited accessibility of the *Natya Sastra* to the educated upper classes. As expressed by Purnima Shah, the importance granted to Bharatanatyam due to its connection to ancient Sanskrit text reflected a contemporary notion of "classical" which became "synonymous with proscenium

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[44] Chakravorty 2000-2001, p. 110-111
[45] Chakravorty 1998, p. 114
[46] Chakravorty 2000-2001, p. 113
[47] Shah 2002, p. 129
[48] Ibid., p. 130

stage versions of traditional dance forms apparently devoid of a purpose other than being 'museumized' exhibitions of a revered but altered past, art for the sake of art."[49]

By the mid-twentieth century, Bharatanatyam was hailed as a classical art form, largely due to its association with the *Natya Sastra*, and thus "acquired a 'national' status as a symbol of the highly refined Indian heritage, unequaled in its complexity of grammar and beauty of expression."[50] In various regions of India, local dance styles were also "classicized" throughout the 1950s and 1960s in a process modeled after the reconstruction of Bharatanatyam. Initially, only four regional dance styles were declared as classical art forms: Bharatanatyam from Tamil Nadu, Kathak from northern India, Manipuri from Manipur, and Kathakali from Kerala. Following a process of standardization based on the principles and elements outlined in the *Natya Sastra*, three additional regional dances styles also gained classical status and national recognition: Odissi from Orissa; Mohiniattam from Kerala; and Kuchipudi from Andhra Pradesh.[51] The formation of state-sponsored dance festivals in 1955 provided a national platform for public performances of these classicized dance forms. Shah notes that these festivals "function as national sites where social memory is evoked, and regional and national identities are negotiated and reformulated through the performance of regional dance forms."[52]

This strategic use of dance and music in nation-building parallels processes in numerous other countries. In Thomas Turino's examination of cultural nationalism in Zimbabwe, he notes that in the celebration for the founding of the nationalist party,

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[49] Shah 2002, p. 137
[50] Ibid., p. 126
[51] Ibid., p. 128
[52] Ibid., p. 126

Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) in 1962, music and dance played a much more prominent role than political speeches. Turino describes how musical "indices"—in the Peircian sense, as signs whose reference to objects is obtained through co-occurrence—can be used to create emotion within political movements.[53] Within the context of the ZAPU rally, the juxtaposition of dances, understood as indexical signs for distinct indigenous groups, were used to create a single iconic sign to represent the nation of Zimbabwe:

> In this event, as in other nationalist rallies, indices of various social groups were combined to create a unified image of the nation: taken as a whole, the ZAPU rally was constructed to represent iconically what that imagined entity might look, sound, and feel like. Visual art, literature, and, in this case, music-dance performance often function as iconic-rhemes, signs interpreted as representing possible objects. This type of sign can help bring the imagined into being by presenting the possibility (of the object = nation) in a concrete, perceptible form. This is all the more powerful when affective indices of peoples' actual homes and allegiances are used to construct the broader iconic sign.[54]

An even more direct parallel can be seen in the organization of the Zimbabwe Festival of African Culture by the Zimbabwe Traditional and Cultural Club in May of 1963. As Turino notes, this event was "explicitly designed to identify and define, as much as celebrate, a uniquely Zimbabwean national culture."[55] The public display of music, dance, dress, food and art can be seen as a "nationalist-inspired cultural renaissance."[56] Again, the music-dance performances included styles (*muchongoyo*, *mbukumba*, *shangara*, and *jerusarema*) that were associated with different regions of Zimbabwe.[57]

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[53] Turino 2000, pp. 174-176
[54] Ibid., pp. 178-179
[55] Ibid., p. 180
[56] Ibid., p. 181
[57] Ibid., p. 182

Kelly M. Askew, in her study of music and cultural politics in Tanzania, notes that:

> In the building of a national culture, authenticity is contested at various levels and alternately exploited to suit differing and at times opposing ends. In Tanzania, this trope is used to distinguish internal groups from each other, thus strengthening and maintaining certain ethnic boundaries, while concomitantly used to distinguish indigenous Tanzanian culture from foreign-born culture, thus erasing or sublimating those same ethnic boundaries.[58]

A common trend in these examples is the rejection of foreign influence in order to promote a historical idea of cultural tradition that can be considered representative of a nation. Eric Hobsbawm's discussion of "invented tradition" refers to cultural practices that "seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition," and that are, for the most part, constructed to create a sense of continuation with "a suitable historic past."[59] This accurately characterizes the revival and reconstruction of temple dance practice into the Sanskritized, classicized, newly-named "Bharatanatyam."

There are some who interpret the name "Bharatanatyam" as a combination of Sanskrit terms: "Bha" from *bhava*, meaning expression of emotion; "ra" from *raga*, referring to the melodic component of music; "ta" from *tala*, referring to the rhythmic structure of music; and *natyam*, meaning dance. Others believe the term was coined as a reference to the sage, Bharata, the author of the *Natya Sastra*. The name "Bharatanatyam" officially came into use in 1932, initiated by dance revivalist E. Krishna Iyer and implemented through the Madras Music Academy. In this context, the word can be translated simply as "Indian Dance,"—*Bhārat* is the Hindi word for

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[58] Askew 2002, p. 221
[59] Hobsbawm 1992, p. 1

India, and is derived from the official Sanskrit name of India, *Bhārata Gaṇarājya*. As Amanda Weidman notes:

> The word *Bharata* gave the dance an image of national importance; at the same time the use of the Sanskrit word *natya* suggested its origins in the Sanskrit treatises on dance.[60]

This also accounts for the alternative spelling of the term: "Bharat Natyam."

1.3 TRANSMISSION AND *ARANGETRAM* – A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

As Bharatanatyam practice shifted from the *isai vellala*[61] community to the Brahmin community, the role and position of the dance teacher changed significantly. Following the dance revival of the 1930s, two distinct styles of Bharatanatyam performance and transmission could be identified: the reconstructed Kalakshetra style of Rukmini Devi, and the traditional Tanjore court style of T. (Tanjore) Balasaraswati. In much scholarship on Indian dance, these two women are presented as opposing figures in post-colonial dance practice.[62]

Avanthi Meduri notes that it is important to consider the unique status and situation of both Balasaraswati and Rukmini Devi in their respective roles as dance performers and teachers. While Balasaraswati belonged to a *devadasi* family, she was not dedicated to a temple as traditional *devadasis* were. Although her ancestors had been temple dancers, both her mother and grandmother were musicians, and had expected Balasaraswati to be the same. Rukmini Devi was an outsider to *devadasi* tradition, being a Brahmin woman, but originally learned dance from hereditary teachers. At the same time, Rukmini Devi could not be identified solely as a Brahmin

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[60] Weidman 2006, p. 120

[61] *Isai vellala* is the caste name for hereditary musicians and dancers in Tamil Nadu, Gaston 2005, p. 366

[62] See Gaston 1991, Allen 1997, O'Shea 1998

woman because of her association with the Theosophist Movement—specifically her marriage to a Bishop of the Liberal Catholic Church, George Sydney Arundale.[63] As Meduri states:

> Balasaraswati, in other words, was neither a true *devadasi*, nor was she not a *devadasi*. ... Like Balasaraswati, Rukmini Devi's identity was under erasure because she was neither a true Brahmin nor was she not a Brahmin.[64]

The Kalakshetra school places emphasis upon dance theory in training students, and uses both the *Natya Sastra* and *Abhinaya Darpana* as sources for dance exercises and choreography. As Janet O'Shea notes, dancers of the Tanjore court style "view 'theory,' here meaning ancient Sanskrit treatises on drama and aesthetics, as a field of inquiry that should be distinct from the practical study of a local and specifically South Indian dance form."[65] Whereas Kalakshetra dancers view Bharatanatyam as a (reconstructed) dance practice based on the authority of ancient traditions, as outlined in Sanskrit texts, Tanjore court style dancers view localized activity in South Indian courts and temples to be the authority in determining dance practice, and often disassociate themselves with the term, "Bharatanatyam."[66]

In traditional *devadasi* practice, the *arangetram* was a debut recital that signified a *devadasi*'s completion of dance training and preceded the selection of a *devadasi*'s patron. The function of this ceremony changed as post-revival dance practice became more common among girls from upper caste families. Both dance training and the presentation of an *arangetram* became markers of social accomplishment that often signified a girl's status as a suitable bride. As such, the

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[63] Meduri 2004, p. 19
[64] Ibid.
[65] O'Shea 1998, p. 52
[66] Ibid., pp. 52-53

ceremony itself became a lavish and expensive affair, and was a means for families to publicly demonstrate their status and wealth.[67] Anne-Marie Gaston notes, however, that hereditary members of the *isai vellala* community were more reluctant to allow their daughters to take up dance because of its association with *devadasi* tradition and "believed it would be detrimental to their marriage prospects."[68]

Many girls that did receive dance training would not continue to dance after marriage, and there was a general expectation that non-hereditary dancers would not take up dance as a profession. Even those who continued beyond their first public performance often emphasized the fact that they did not perform for money. Early non-hereditary dancers preferred to disassociate their debut performances with the *arangetram* tradition of the *devadasis*. The Brahmin dancer and teacher, Kalanidhi Narayanan, shares this sentiment:

> If I were a *devadasi* girl my first recital would have been called an *arangetram* with all its rituals, but I broke the tradition ... For my family dancing was not to earn a livelihood but to learn an artform.[69]

Until the 1950s, most *arangetram* performances were conducted exclusively by male *nattuvanars* of the *isai vellala* community, as they were most often the teachers of dance students. By the 1960s, *arangetram* practice conducted by hereditary *nattuvanars* had decreased significantly as non-hereditary teachers became more prominent in presenting their students. Matthew Harp Allen notes a recent shift of power and authority in the relationship between the dance teacher and student:

> Formerly, the teacher wielded near-complete authority over his charge from youth through her maturity, invariably directing the dancer's performances and retaining considerable control over her career.

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[67] Gaston 2005, p. 66
[68] Ibid., p. 126
[69] Narayanan, quoted in Gaston 2005, p. 67

> Today, students engage teachers and pay cash tuition for training. (This has resonances of the modern consumer, shopping for instruction.) Once mature, dancers rarely use their guru as the nattuvanar onstage for their performances, relying instead on a cadre of more-or-less freelance nattuvanars and accompanying musicians, or even on taped music.[70]

The replacement of the *nattuvanar* has further implications when considered within the context of the dance revival movement. While the practice of dance performance had shifted from the hereditary *devadasi* community to the social elite, the teachers themselves could also be eventually replaced in the process of training new students of the upper classes.[71]

Conventional gender roles of dance teachers and students began to shift as well, as female dancers were trained to become teachers and *nattuvanars*, and men began learning to perform dance. At this point, many Kalakshetra students had completed their dance training and became teachers, either at Kalakshetra itself, or by establishing their own dance schools in Chennai and other cities. With the increasing availability of dance teachers, the popularity of dance training grew significantly, and this, in turn, made it financially possible for trained dancers to take up teaching as a full-time career by the 1980s.

The market for Bharatanatyam training was expanding beyond India as well, as teachers began practicing in cities throughout the world, as Avanthi Meduri notes:

> Completing their education, hundreds of Kalakshetra students, turned into qualified teachers, returned to their respective homes, dispersing themselves in the Indian, Asian, and western worlds to which they belonged. Kalakshetra students are thus scattered across the world today, teaching and performing Kalakshetra Bharatanatyam in schools,

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[70] Allen 1997, p. 67
[71] Ibid., p. 65

> colleges, universities, and private training academies located in South Asia, Asia, Europe, England, America, and Australia.[72]

While Kalakshetra-trained teachers were quite prominent internationally, Balasaraswati also had a presence outside of India due to her affiliation with the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) during the 1960s. She was invited to teach Tanjore court style dance for the UCLA Dance Department, and this position was later taken up by her student, Medha Yodh.[73]

With Bharatanatyam teachers dispersed throughout the world, it became possible for diasporic Indian families to send their daughters for dance training outside of India. Bharanatyam practice became not only socially acceptable, but a mark of social validation, and the *arangetram*, in its new form, became central to the process of dance transmission within South Asian communities in the diaspora.

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[72] Meduri 2004, p. 15
[73] Meduri 1996, p. xxviii

CHAPTER 2

BHARATANATYAM PRACTICE IN CANADA

2.1 BHARATANATYAM IN A NEW SETTING

Bharatanatyam has been taught in Canada for over 30 years, both in private studios and in established dance schools. Menaka Thakkar, one of the founding Bharatanatyam instructors in Canada, opened "Nrtyakala: The Canadian Academy of Indian Dance" in Toronto in 1975. Soon after, she founded the Menaka Thakkar Dance Company, which has presented dance productions featuring Canadian-trained dancers as well as visiting artists from India. In 1980, Lata Pada, a prominent performer and teacher of Bharatanatyam, established the "Sampradaya Dance Academy" in Mississauga, and later founded her dance production company, Sampradaya Dance Creations, in 1990. Today there are more than an estimated 50 Bharatanatyam dance instructors in the Toronto area alone.[74]

Indian dance institutions in Canada have thrived due to on-going support from public arts funding organizations such as the Canada Council for the Arts. However, Bharatanatyam dancers were not initially recognized as professional artists by such organizations, as there were no grants available for dance forms other than mainstream genres such as ballet or jazz. In their attempts to have their institutions recognized by the Canada Council for the Arts, early Bharatanatyam teachers found that their students were not being considered professional dancers primarily because Bharatanatyam was not their full-time career. Menaka Thakkar eventually succeeded in convincing the council when she emphasized that her dance school operated in a fashion similar to the National Ballet School, in that her students were trained in her

[74] Lata Pada Personal Interview, June 26, 2007

academy for years and could then be offered positions as performers within her dance company. Some of her students have now been with her for over 20 years, remaining in the Menaka Thakkar Dance Company as rehearsal directors, teachers and performers. The Canada Council for the Arts has also come to recognize the fact that even mainstream dance artists must often hold secondary careers in order to sustain themselves financially. Menaka Thakkar says she is grateful that she came to Canada at an age when she had the energy to work towards incorporating Bharatanatyam into the mainstream dance community:

> I was enthusiastic [and] was arguing all the time with the council. ... It took time. I did not get any regular [funding] until 1992 or 1993. They have recognized and realized, and Canada is a unique country in that sense. When they realize, they realize fully. ... But it took time to fight. Breaking new ground is always hard.[75]

It is also noteworthy that for the past 40 years the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute has awarded fellowships to scholars and performing artists for specialized study in India. Through the Arts Fellowship program, countless dancers from Canada have received advanced training in India, most notably Bharatanatyam performer and instructor, Jai Govinda (a French-Canadian dancer, originally from a ballet background with Les Grands Ballets Canadiens in Montreal). In 1994, he founded the "Jai Govinda Dance Academy" in Vancouver, and established the company, "Mandala Arts and Culture," in 1999. Through this company, Jai Govinda presents and promotes Bharatanatyam performances as well as interdisciplinary dance works. Menaka Thakkar, Lata Pada and Jai Govinda have all had their respective Bharatanatyam dance academies recognized by Canadian Heritage under the National Arts Training Contribution Program.

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[75] Menaka Thakkar Personal Interview, June 14, 2007

In her study of second-generation Indo-Canadian youth, Vanaja Dhruvarajan notes the importance placed upon girls as bearers and transmitters of ethnic culture:

> As future mothers it is assumed that it is they who have to make sure that ethnic culture is transmitted from one generation to the next. This requires that the girls participate to a greater extent in cultural and religious activities.[76]

It is therefore not surprising that the vast majority of Bharatanatyam students in Canada are girls.[77] Lata Pada states that most Indian immigrant parents who bring their Canadian-born daughters to the Sampradaya Dance Academy, do so with the hope that their daughters will receive exposure to Indian culture through dance training:

> I'd say 90% of the time, [the parents] say something like: 'We want them to learn our culture. We want them to feel like they are in an environment that really enforces who they are, and give them a sense of identity.'[78]

Menaka Thakkar expresses the anxiety faced by immigrant parents who feel a sense of obligation to the family they left behind in India, and who fear that their children may lose all connection with their Indian heritage:

> Some parents are very much under pressure. They left everything behind—their family connections, their family ties, their culture, everything. They came here to give a better life to children. And when they see that children are not [involved] in our culture – [they think], what face are we going to show?[79]

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[76] Dhruvarajan 2003, p. 176

[77] It should be noted here that also in India, the vast majority of Bharatanatyam dancers are female. While professional dance academies and institutions, such as Kalakshetra, do have male students that train and perform in touring productions, young boys are not often enrolled in dance classes for recreational purposes while growing up, as numerous girls are. Within the context of the Indian diaspora in North America, the decision to send girls for Bharatanatyam classes appears to be motivated by the above-mentioned concern with girls as bearers of culture.

[78] Lata Pada Personal Interview, June 26, 2007

[79] Menaka Thakkar Personal Interview, June 14, 2007

Kiruthika Rathanaswami, a student of the Jai Govinda Dance Academy, was born in Pondicherry, India, but moved to Canada when she was two years old. Her father, Dr. Palaniswami Rathanaswami, who has served as past President of the Thamil Cultural Society of British Columbia, observes that many Indian parents in Vancouver encourage Bharatanatyam lessons as one of many options for children to engage with Indian culture while growing up in Canada:

> As immigrant parents from India, they like to see their tradition is being kept alive. The only way to keep that alive is to engage their children in some of the activities related to Indian culture.[80]

While Lata Pada does believe that learning Bharatanatyam is a wonderful way to learn about Indian culture, she is increasingly worried about parents bringing their daughters to her dance academy solely for this purpose. She emphasizes that her mission at the Sampradaya Dance Academy is to teach an art form and that the cultural transmission is implicit in the training. For example, when learning a *Ganesh Kauthuvam*[81], a student will learn the mythology surrounding *Ganesh* and other Hindu figures. In promoting her dance school, Lata Pada is especially careful not to present Hinduism as a focus of the training, because she does not want the dance classes to be interpreted as religious education. In this way, she attempts to provide a welcoming environment for Muslim, Sikh, and Christian students as well as Hindu students. In addition, she feels that promoting the training of Bharatanatyam as an art form will allow it to flourish in the mainstream performing arts community, and that: "only when we do that … are we going to develop a better understanding of the beauty and the dynamism of Bharatanatyam rather than just thinking of it as an exotic

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[80] Palaniswami Rathanaswami Personal Interview, October 3, 2007

[81] An introductory dance composition on the theme of *Ganesh*, that is often performed at the beginning of a Bharatanatyam recital.

art form."[82] While Muslim, Sikh and Christian students do make up a small percentage of students in Bharatanatyam academies, students from Hindu families are still in the majority. As the motivation of many Hindu parents in bringing their daughters to dance classes for religious education continues, there remains, in some Bharatanatyam institutions, a perpetual gap between the instructor's objectives and parental expectations.

Another expectation from most parents of Bharatanatyam students is that their daughters will eventually perform in public venues for cultural events within the Indo-Canadian community. As Lata Pada states:

> We live in a culture that is very goal-oriented and [students] get certificates for swimming [and] skating, and so they want to be able to experience the same sort of thing with dance.[83]

Rena Boggaram has been learning Bharatanatyam under Jai Govinda for over fifteen years. Her mother, Bindu Boggaram, agrees that parents place great importance on their children's performances: "For me being a parent, when your daughter goes on the stage, goes in front of so many people, that is the greatest thing for a parent."[84]

With the growing popularity of Bharatanatyam dance classes and the increasing importance placed on public performance, the notion of authenticity in performance has become a prominent issue for Bharatanatyam instructors and students in Canada. A number of students at the Jai Govinda Dance Academy initially learned semi-classical dancing from other teachers before taking Bharatanatyam lessons under Jai Govinda. Semi-classical dance, which is very loosely influenced by

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[82] Lata Pada Personal Interview, June 26, 2007
[83] Ibid.
[84] Bindu Boggaram Personal Interview, May 27, 2007

classical dance movements, but more in the style of popular film dance, has become immensely popular among Indian communities in many Canadian and American cities. The popularity of semi-classical dance has been a topic of debate among teachers and students of Bharatanatyam for several years. On the one hand, semi-classical dance training is considerably less intensive than classical dance training, and is often seen as a recreational activity, providing an opportunity for second-generation Indian girls to socialize and perform at Indian cultural events. On the other hand, Bharatanatyam dancers are increasingly concerned with semi-classical dance schools being advertised as Bharatanatyam schools and offering *arangetrams* for students. This concern appears to be motivated by a desire to sustain authentic Bharatanatyam practice in Canada and to distinguish it as separate from non-traditional dance forms, especially in the context of performances in public venues. For Ishwarya Chaitanya, a student of the Jai Govinda Dance Academy, public performance is a responsibility that is not to be taken lightly:

> Anytime you perform you are like an ambassador for your culture—an unofficial ambassador. And if you are claiming that [semi classical dance] is what is traditional and this is what is done in India, then you should not be performing. No matter who your audience is.[85]

Menaka Thakkar insists that students pay thorough attention to detail and execution of correct technique before they perform in public:

> [I tell my students that] in India, if you go and perform a lousy program … people know what is good and what is bad. They'll say, she's a lousy dancer at the most. Here [in Canada], we have to stand for our culture. And if you start doing this watered down thing [dance] … then what are we going to stand for?[86]

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[85] Ishwarya Chaitanya Personal Interview, May 28, 2007
[86] Menaka Thakkar Personal Interview, June 14, 2007

While larger cultural centres in India, such as Chennai in the south and Mumbai in the north, do have established dance communities with a large pool of professional performers, connoisseurs and critics, many people in more rural areas of India do not have extensive exposure to classical dance. Kiruthika Rathanaswami notes that her family in India has little or no exposure to Bharatanatyam because they do not live in a large city:

> Nobody in my family did dance back home. My family friends in India ask, how did she get into this dance? … So in that way, I don't know if I would have ever learned dance if I was in India, because there's just not the opportunity—people don't know about Bharatanatyam.[87]

In this sense, some parents of Bharatanatyam students admit that even in India, not everyone can always distinguish good technique from bad technique. Ishwarya expresses her concern when dance teachers allow their students to learn and perform at a faster pace without paying full attention to correct technique—a practice that she has seen with some students prior to joining the Jai Govinda Dance Academy, citing one example:

> After one week of lessons with her first teacher, she knew her *Alarippu*.[88] After one week! In three weeks she was performing! So that's the most important thing for [some parents], to see their kids on stage.[89]

Ultimately, one of the principal motivating factors for emphasizing authenticity and correct technique by Bharatanatyam dancers is the fact the majority of diasporic audiences (both Canadian and Indian) are simply not familiar with the technique of Bharatanatyam itself, and are not necessarily able to distinguish between

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[87] Kiruthika Rathanaswami Personal Interview, May 19, 2007

[88] The first standard dance composition learned in Bharatanatyam, usually only after several years of basic training.

[89] Ishwarya Chaitanya Personal Interview, May 28, 2007

classical and semi-classical dancing—a fact that is thought to potentially threaten the integrity of Bharatanatyam practice in Canada.

By developing dance companies, Menaka Thakkar, Lata Pada, and Jai Govinda provide professional performance experiences for their dancers and pay them to perform in their tours. At the same time, however, they all encourage their students to think of dance as a parallel or secondary career. Jai Govinda notes that dancers in Ballet BC, Vancouver's professional ballet company, are often only employed for two to three months in a year, which makes it nearly impossible to rely on dance as a full time career:

> Most of the dancers in [Vancouver] live in utter poverty—literally … So I'm not encouraging [my students] into that. They're all well-educated—every single one of them have bachelor's, master's degrees—they should be able to get good jobs. So I think it's possible to do both.[90]

Lata Pada also acknowledges the difficulty of sustaining a full-time dance career in the mainstream dance community, and observes that Bharatanatyam dancers within the Indian community have added parental pressure and expectations of high academic achievement. In a number of cases, the students themselves are concerned about being financially independent, as Rena expresses:

> A woman always has to be able to stand on her own two feet … if something were to happen and if no one was around, especially because we don't have family here, there's no one to fall back on if something happens. So that's also a reason why I wanted to pursue my career.[91]

Jai Govinda notes that even very talented Bharatanatyam dancers have difficulty finding performance opportunities on their own, often because they lack the

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[90] Jai Govinda Personal Interview, June 2, 2007
[91] Rena Boggaram Personal Interview, May 27, 2007

skill to promote themselves. For most western dancers, performance opportunities are available in group productions by dance companies. Once hired by a dance company, the dancer only has to learn the choreography, rehearse and perform. The lighting, costumes, promotion, hall rental, and tickets sales are all taken care of by the company itself. However, a solo Bharatanatyam dancer often must take on all of these responsibilities in addition to preparing for a performance. Further, it has been observed that most Indian associations would rather host performances by visiting artists from India than local performers.[92] This appears to be motivated by a belief that performers from India are more "authentic" than performers from Canada, despite the level of training that can be achieved through local Bharatanatyam institutions.

Another reality that Bharatanatyam teachers face in Canada is the fact that dance practice is not the only priority in a student's life, especially when it is generally understood that dance will take second-place to a separate career. Jai Govinda finds that his advanced students are often unable to devote time to dance practice while balancing other responsibilities:

> Like Vidya—she's finishing a master's degree. Come on, she's got a life, she's got her husband, pretty soon it's going to be the kids coming up. So [students will] continue dancing at their own pace.[93]

Rena Boggaram, while continuing to train and teach at the Jai Govinda Dance Academy, also works full-time as a school teacher and finds it nearly impossible to set aside time to devote solely to dance practice, since it is not her "main focus."[94]

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[92] Jai Govinda Personal Interview, June 2, 2007
[93] Ibid.
[94] Rena Boggaram Personal Interview, May 27, 2007

While numerous Bharatanatyam teachers in Canada have trained a generation of accomplished young dancers over the past three decades, they are now increasingly concerned about the future of Bharatanatyam practice in Canada. Lata Pada has had many students pursue dance performance within her dance company, but she is unsure if any will take up teaching as a full-time profession and train the next generation of Bharatanatyam dancers at the same level that she has maintained at her dance academy, remarking that "it's a pretty dismal situation ... a typical immigrant dilemma."[95] While most first-generation parents are proud when their daughters perform and teach recreationally, they ultimately define success by academic achievement and careers with high salaries. As such, there is a fear among Bharatanatyam teachers that their second-generation students will be unable to commit to sustaining artistic practices in the long run.

2.2 TRADITION AND INNOVATION IN DANCE TRANSMISSION

In most Canadian dance institutions that teach Bharatanatyam, the process of dance transmission is modelled after the *guru-shishya* (teacher-disciple) system in India. Students learn privately under one teacher and imbibe the particular style and repertoire of that teacher. Some institutions offer group classes for beginner students to learn *adavus* (fundamental steps). After completing their basic training, these students eventually switch to private lessons and begin to learn Bharatanatyam repertoire in a progressive order.

They first learn an *alarippu*, which is a standard dance that isolates movements of the neck, eyes, and arms, and incorporates sequences learned through

[95] Lata Pada Personal Interview, June 26, 2007

adavus. After this is completed, students learn repertoire that introduces elements of *abhinaya* (expression), such as *slokas*[96], or *padams*[97]. Through these dances, students learn to use *mudras* (stylized hand gestures) and extensive facial expressions to depict the poetic lines of text. Students also learn *nrtta*-based dances that are purely technical, abstract compositions that combine intricate sequences incorporating steps learned in basic training. Compositions that combine both expression and abstract technique are classified as *nrtya*. As example of such compositions is the *varnam*, which is one of the most difficult Bharatanatyam dances due to its length, scope of expression, and great physical demands. The *varnam* has a fixed structure, in which poetic lines of text are alternated with complex rhythmic sequences or *jatis*. Through the process of learning each of these compositions, Bharatanatyam students begin to build a *margam*, or complete set of repertoire for performance in a solo recital.

My own experiences with teaching have taken me along a very different path from the transmission method of my Guru in India and of other Bharatanatyam teachers whom I have come across in Canada. For the past four years, I have been teaching introductory Bharatanatyam dance classes for Campus Recreation at the University of Alberta. I have found that the classes I teach serve a very different purpose from conventional private Bharatanatyam schools that cater to the Indo-Canadian community. My primary goal in implementing these classes was simply to introduce people to the dance form. I wanted people who had little or no exposure to Bharatanatyam to come and just experience it in a recreational setting. Because of the

[96] Traditional Sanskrit verses that often describe and praise Hindu gods and goddesses.
[97] Lyrical compositions that are *abhinaya* (expression) based.

unique nature of this setting, I have made necessary adjustments in my teaching, as the transmission process is quite different from traditional private training.

Over the course of a term, I teach ten weekly classes, each lasting one hour. Throughout these classes, I teach the students very basic elements of Bharatanatyam technique. I also teach *abhinaya* (expression) through a small expression-based sequence, so the students can experience the versatility of the *mudras* (hand gestures). In the process, I introduce elements of dance and music theory by consistently using the Sanskrit names for *mudras*, explaining the *tala* (rhythm) system of *Karnatik* music and teaching the students to recite rhythmic passages. The class has proven to be quite popular—for the most part, class enrolment is consistently full with a waiting list. What I have found most interesting is the fact that out of the 150 or so students I have taught, very few have come from Indian backgrounds. The vast majority of my students attend classes at the University of Alberta and come to my class as complete outsiders to the tradition. As such, the motivation for students to attend these classes is considerably different from that of second-generation Indian students (and their parents) in traditional Bharatanatyam lessons.

One of my Canadian dance students recently approached me after class to tell me how much she loved the "outfit" I was wearing, referring to the traditional *salwar kameez* that I wear for dance practice and teaching. She wanted to know where she could purchase one for use in class, and I suggested some local Indian clothing stores in Edmonton. As we were leaving the dance studio, she expressed great enthusiasm for the material we were covering in the class, stating that it never occurred to her that everyday actions such as a girl's morning routine could be part of dance. She also

said that she appreciated the opportunity to learn about Indian culture through the dance and remarked, "It's so fascinating. Sometimes I wish I could just be adopted into another culture."

I was curious as to what her cultural background was, but she unenthusiastically said, "I'm nothing. I'm just Canadian. I guess generations ago we were, you know, European. But as Canadians what culture do we have? Country-line dancing?" With a laugh, she described her fascination with the display of diverse cultures at events such as Heritage Days, an annual multicultural festival in Edmonton: "I walk around and see all these amazing booths representing different countries, and I'm like, 'Where's my booth?'" This has been a common sentiment expressed by many of my Canadian students—the desire to learn about an "exotic" culture, often in the perceived absence of their own cultural traditions.

A Nepali woman attending my class a few years ago once remarked that she enjoyed learning the *abhinaya* expression sequences and wondered if I might take on her young daughters as private students because she felt they would respond well to my teaching style. I asked if they had experience with dance and she remarked: "Oh yes, they are learning with a Bharatanatyam teacher in town, but she only makes them do steps. Always steps and no dances." I immediately replied that her daughters had a fine Bharatanatyam instructor because she was training them using traditional transmission methods, and that I would do the same with private students. The format of the group classes I was teaching at the university could not be taken as a model for formal Bharatanatyam instruction.

For this reason, I have always been very candid with my students about the demands of traditional long-term training, and emphasize that this course is a very brief introduction to the art form. The majority of students attend simply for recreational purposes with no intention of pursuing further training. Many students have been initially surprised at the physical demands of the classes, and appreciative of the chance to have a "full-body workout" through dance. As the course is offered through Campus Recreation within the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, I present the course as an opportunity to be active while trying something new and perhaps, in the process, learning something about Indian culture. Over the years, a small number of students have expressed an interest in learning privately after taking the class, and I have encouraged them to undergo the traditional training process that is available through Bharatanatyam institutions and private teachers in Canada. In this sense, I view my classes as an alternative way for people—not connected to the Indian community—to become involved with Bharatanatyam.

2.3 *ARANGETRAM* PRACTICE IN THE DIASPORA

Returning once again to the more traditional Bharatanatyam institutions, it can be observed that many second-generation Indian students that do continue with dance training beyond the basic level do so with the intention of completing an *arangetram*. Bindu Boggeram says that for Rena and herself, *arangetram* was in the back of their minds since the beginning of Rena's training under Jai Govinda:

> Any *arangetram* that we get the invitation, we [would] go. I used to go mostly because I wanted [Rena] to see the *arangetrams*, to have a feel of it, what is an *arangetram*, what takes place.[98]

[98] Bindu Boggaram Personal Interview, May 27, 2007

For Jai Govinda, the *arangetram* is an essential part of learning Bharatanatyam and is a very natural progression from the preparation of repertoire. As the students train, they begin building a full *margam*, and Jai notes that as soon as they are ready to learn their *varnam*, the *arangetram* process is already on. They set a date for the event, generally one or two years later, and continue to learn and practice the rest of the repertoire until the performance. Jai views the *arangetram* as a platform for people to notice and encourage a dancer, and emphasizes that the recital itself is still very much a beginning step in a dancer's career, as implied by the meaning of the word, *arangetram*:

> *Arangetram* means 'coming onto the stage.' We don't expect them to just explode. It's their first performance—it's a premiere. They come with whatever they have and we give them a chance to see if they have the stamina to continue, if they have the mindset to continue, if they even like performing.[99]

Most Bharatanatyam teachers in Canada acknowledge that while in the past, the *arangetram* signified a dancer's first public performance, the majority of students today are given many opportunities to perform during their training, long before completing an *arangetram*. In recent years, this has become common practice in India as well as in the diaspora. As such, the *arangetram* as a dancer's debut full-length solo recital carries a different significance for Canadian dancers in an institutionalized teaching system, as stated by Lata Pada:

> The *arangetram* is the opportunity of the dancer [to work] very intensively and closely with the teacher in a goal she has set for herself … to reach that level of excellence, to be able to go through the intensity of the training, and to be able to hold their own through a debut recital … And within the context of being here in Canada, I

[99] Jai Govinda Personal Interview, June 2, 2007

> think it's a very strong validation of their own commitment to the art form.[100]

Students of Menaka Thakkar's dance academy first work towards a "junior *arangetram*"—a simplified dance program without the major dance items such as a *varnam* or advanced *abhinaya* composition. After completion of this performance, students receive a certificate and have the option of pursuing further advanced training to work towards a full *arangetram*, or "senior *arangetram*." Menaka Thakkar began this practice to accommodate students who were interested in preparing a recital, but not at the level of a formal *arangetram*. By offering the option of a junior *arangetram* with a certificate, Menaka Thakkar aims to provide some acknowledgement of basic training for students to help them with university admission and scholarship applications.

Menaka Thakkar has observed that many families are preoccupied with publicly displaying status and wealth in the planning of *arangetrams*:

> I suggested [that the dance studio is an] extremely beautiful place for junior *arangetram*. We have lights, we do the whole stage decorations with flowers, we accommodate 200 people here, and no rent for [students] because this is our own space. Dressing rooms are here, parking is ample, nobody has to pay. So I suggested [this] to quite a few people.
> [They say], 'No, but then everybody will think that we are trying to save money.'
> I say, 'Then pay a donation to the school, so you're not saving money. And say that you have given a donation to the school.'
> [They say]. 'No but this is not a real venue. ... York Woods is the Public Library [theatre] so their rent is only $300. City Playhouse charges $900 and seats 100 more.'
> I say, 'Do you think that it is proportionately fine? 100 seats more but about $600 more?'
> They say, 'Yeah, that's okay.'[101]

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[100] Lata Pada Personal Interview, June 26, 2007
[101] Menaka Thakkar Personal Interview, June 14, 2007

Bindu Boggaram observes that the issue of status is especially prominent in the Indian community: "When one person does something, someone else wants to do it better."[102] She says that those who come from India have this stronger sense of status consciousness, but she hopes that the next generation of Indian parents born in Canada will not have the same concerns.[103]

Some new trends that have emerged over the past several years of *arangetram* practice in Canada include: group *arangetrams* presenting up to four or five dancers at once (dividing the *margam* among all of the dancers or choreographing group numbers); solo dancers wearing up to five or six different costumes in a single *arangetram* performance (with guest speeches scheduled during costume changes); elaborate decorations and displays of enlarged photos in the lobby; and catered meals during intermission or after the program. These trends, largely motivated by a preoccupation with public display of status, demonstrate a considerable change in the significance of *arangetram* in Canada. As a result, teachers, students and parents can be divided when it comes to planning an *arangetram*. Lata Pada takes a firm stance on this issue:

> I won't do it [*arangetram*] in the first place if it's all about social status or spending money. I completely discourage it and I've had students who have gone to other teachers for that reason.[104]

Another increasing concern among Bharatanatyam instructors is a decline in the quality of *arangetram* performances. There are countless Bharatanatyam institutions and private teachers in Canada, and a broad range of conflicting motivations for dance training and expectations for public performance. Students

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[102] Bindu Boggaram Personal Interview, May 26, 2007
[103] Ibid.
[104] Lata Pada Personal Interview, June 26, 2007

have been known to leave a Bharatanatyam teacher in order to learn with another teacher who promises an earlier *arangetram*. Such cases often result in sub-standard *arangetram* performances as the students are placed in a demanding performance situation without sufficient training or experience. It has been observed that the majority of these students cease their dance training and performing immediately following the completion of *arangetram*. This trend is becoming increasingly common as dancers, and especially their parents and families, place more importance on the social aspects of the event than the performance itself. Moreover, it has already been noted that the majority of audiences do not recognize correct performance technique anyway.

This brings us back to the question of authenticity in performance, which is of special concern in *arangetram* practice because the reputation of a dance teacher rides on the success of a student's performance. Because *arangetram* involves the preparation and performance of a complete *margam* that showcases a broad spectrum of Bharatanatyam technique—from abstract, rhythmic sequences to expressive, mimetic storytelling—it functions as a sort of examination after years of training, and thus validates the teacher as well as the student. For Bharatanatyam teachers who maintain traditional transmission methods in the preparation for *arangetram*, the real concern is not only that performances have become sub-standard due to the changing function of *arangetram* in the diaspora, but also that people do not recognize that the performances are sub-standard. What emerges here is a conflict between the cultural capital of authenticity in *arangetram* performance and the social capital of publicly

displaying wealth through *arangetram* presentation within Indo-Canadian communities.

2.4 PREPARING FOR THE EVENT: *ARANGETRAM* IN PROCESS

During the time I was conducting my fieldwork in Vancouver, Vidya Kotamraju was in the process of preparing for her *arangetram*, to be held June 2, 2007. A 27-year-old graduate student in Computer Engineering at Simon Fraser University, Vidya immigrated to Canada from Goa, India, in 2004, and now lives in Burnaby with her husband, Bhushan. Vidya had learned and performed dance recreationally in India for several years, and upon arriving in Canada, thought she would try something new by searching for a ballet teacher. Incidentally, her search produced the name Jai Govinda (due to his ballet background), and Vidya began formal training in Bharatanatyam at the Jai Govinda Dance Academy.

While Vidya did have exposure to dance in India, she emphasizes that she did not have the opportunity to pursue it to the level that she has with Jai Govinda. She notices a significant difference between the expectations of her teacher in India, who taught as a hobby while having a separate full-time career, and the expectations of Jai Govinda, who trains at a more professional level. The possibility of completing an *arangetram* had not occurred to Vidya until she met Jai Govinda and watched one of his other students, Kiruthika Rathanaswami, prepare for her *arangetram*. As preparation for Vidya's *arangetram* began, Vidya quickly realized that the responsibility of rehearsing for the performance along with planning the event was far greater and more time-consuming than she had ever imagined. The year-long process

became especially difficult in the months leading up to the program date, as Vidya was simultaneously attending rehearsals and working to complete her Master's thesis.

2.4.1 *ARANGETRAM* REHEARSAL

Walking into Jai Govinda's private studio is like entering a temple for dance—statues of gods and goddesses, silk fabrics and cushions in the waiting area, artwork and dance photos along the walls all the way up to the high ceiling, and a hardwood dance floor in the centre. The studio loft also serves as Jai's private apartment. As Vidya stretches before her rehearsal with Jai, she whispers to me that she was up late last night working on her thesis because she had to meet a deadline for her supervisor. I ask if her supervisor is aware of her *arangetram* and she tells me that he is, but he doesn't necessarily understand or appreciate the commitment involved. She pauses, then smiles and says, "Even I did not realize the extent of the commitment involved."[105]

Jai enters the dance area and greets us warmly. As Vidya moves to the centre of the dance floor to begin *Namaskar* (a salutation that begins and ends every dance class and performance), Jai sits with his back against the wall covered by an enormous mirror. The rehearsal begins, and Vidya dances in front of Jai, eyeing her reflection for correct posture, while Jai sings the lyrics for the dance compositions and recites the rhythmic syllables for *jatis*.[106]

Vidya will begin her *arangetram* performance with a *sloka*, or traditional Sanskrit verse, that is a salutation to *Shiva*, or *Nataraj*, the cosmic dancer in Hindu

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[105] Fieldnotes, May 23, 2007

[106] Rhythmic sequences involving pure, technical dance steps with no poetic meaning.

mythology. Vidya specifically requested this *sloka* for use in the *arangetram* because of its significance to classical dance:

> *Āngikam bhuvanam yasya*
> *Vācikam sarvavāngamayam*
> *Āhāryam candratārādi*
> *Tam numah sātvikam śivam*
>
> [We bow to *Shiva,* the benevolent one, whose limbs are the world, whose words and poetry are the essence of all languages, and whose adornments are the sun and the stars.]

Vidya will be the first of Jai's students to have the *alarippu* omitted from her *arangetram* program. Jai has removed the *alarippu* because after seeing this same item repeated at the beginning of every show, it becomes tedious and somewhat redundant for an older, more mature student such as Vidya. Instead, he has choreographed a longer invocation to open the program. Following the invocation, Vidya will perform a *pushpanjali* (offering of flowers), *jatiswaram*, and *varnam* in the first half. The second half will consist of two *abhinaya*-based compositions, a *thillana* (a rhythmic composition featuring sequences of pure technical steps, each performed in three successive speeds), and the program will end with a *mangalam* (auspicious final prayer).

After Vidya finishes rehearsing her *varnam*—her most difficult composition, 32-minutes in length—Jai is pleased and tells her that there are still some minor corrections and fine-tuning needed here and there, but the overall presentation is higher than the level of an *arangetram*. He says that Vidya is able to express the sentiment of the composition in a more mature way than his younger students who completed their *arangetrams* at an earlier age. As Vidya prepares to leave, she schedules the last few rehearsals with Jai. Noticing that Vidya seems more physically

fatigued than usual, Jai wonders if she has been sleeping enough and encourages her to get more rest. Vidya just smiles, knowingly.

2.4.2 *ARANGETRAM* PLANNING

Sitting with Vidya in her living room just two days before her *arangetram*, we talk as Vidya's mother prepares lunch in the kitchen. Vidya's mother and father both arrived from India weeks earlier to spend time with Vidya and to help with the *arangetram*. There are boxes on the floor by the entrance, containing Vidya's dance costumes, jewelry, make-up and flower garlands. While listing the tasks she must complete before the big day, Vidya remarks that most of the other girls at the dance academy live with their parents, and thus have fewer responsibilities at home: "They just come to class and eat good food, which I really missed out on." Glancing at her mother in the kitchen, she smiles: "Thanks to my mom, I'm eating much better. I think I didn't have any stamina when I started off."[107]

The planning process up to this point has been hectic. Vidya laughs as she remarks that there should be an "Arangetram Planner," to take care of all the necessary arrangements. She also notes that since she has learned so much in the process of preparing for the event, she would like to create a document that outlines everything a dancer must keep in mind, including a timeline and contact information for hall booking, catering, and printing. In preparation for planning her *arangetram*, Vidya turned to a past graduate of the Jai Govinda Dance Academy for advice.

Kiruthika Rathanaswami completed her *arangetram* on Saturday, September 4, 2004, at Gateway Theatre in Richmond, British Columbia. While the preparation of

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[107] Vidya Kotamraju Personal Interview, May 27, 2007

the dance program was a lengthy process carried out through her dance training with Jai Govinda, it took nearly a year to plan all of the other aspects of the event, alongside the performance itself. As a past President of the Thamil Cultural Society, and a continuing member of its Executive Board, Kiruthika's father, Dr. Palaniswami Rathanaswami, had extensive prior experience planning cultural events, and was thus in a position to take care of many technical arrangements for Kiruthika's *arangetram*. He booked the hall one year in advance, which is typical for most performance venues in Vancouver. Since Jai had presented other *arangetrams* for past students, Dr. Rathanaswami was able to contact reliable local businesses for catering as well as the printing of invitations and program brochures. The invitations were printed in both Tamil and English, and featured a specially selected picture of *Ganesh* dancing on the front [see Figures 1.1 and 1.2].

Rather than serving a meal at the event, Kiruthika's family decided to offer light snacks (*samosas*, *vadas*[108] and sweets) after the program was completed. Kiruthika had two new dance costumes made for the program by a specialist tailor in Vancouver, and her dance jewelry had already been purchased in India three years earlier. Under the supervision of Jai, Kiruthika had a photo shoot in full costume, make-up and jewelry, in which she posed for several pictures for use in the program brochure to be handed out to the audience. They then went through a selection process, in which Jai chose the photos with the most dynamic and accurate poses. Colour photos were selected for the front and back cover of the program brochure [see Figure 2], and the inner pages were printed in black and white. Jai and Kiruthika prepared the written material for the program brochure as well, including:

[108] Battered, deep-fried lentil dumplings.

biographical information on both student and teacher; explanations of each dance composition; and acknowledgements. Numerous friends, family and other students of the Jai Govinda Dance Academy were asked to assist as volunteers on the performance day.

The involvement of the Indian community in an *arangetram* is evident, not only in the help provided by volunteers, but also in the participation of the community as audience members. Kiruthika notes that after sending out a number of invitations, several members of the Thamil Cultural Society came to know about her upcoming *arangetram* and either inquired as to why they were not invited, or simply asked if they could also attend the event. Kiruthika states that most of these additional audience members were not initially invited since they were not very well acquainted with her family. As members of the Thamil Cultural Society, these other families would have watched Kiruthika grow up over the years as she actively performed for the Society's cultural events, and were thus invested in attending her most significant performance. In this way, the *arangetram* can be seen to serve a purpose, not only for the immediate family and friends of a dancer, but also for a diasporic Indian community.

Unlike Kiruthika, who grew up in Canada, Vidya had only lived in Burnaby for about three years and did not have any family nearby. In preparation for her *arangetram*, she found herself making most of the arrangements herself, with guidance from Jai and Kiruthika's father. Expecting a smaller audience than previous *arangetrams*, Vidya booked a smaller performance hall—the Frederic Wood Theatre at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. Without a network of people in

the area, Vidya found herself relying on her contacts in India. The saris for her dance costumes were purchased in Kerala through a connection with her mother's friend, and the costumes were made by a tailor in Bangalore who was recommended by Vidya's first dance teacher. During her last visit to India, Vidya bought her dance jewelry in Bombay. Vidya's invitations were designed as colour postcards by her friend, Meera Shah, in Vancouver [see Figure 3]. Vidya is happy to have the support of the other girls from the Jai Govinda Dance Academy, who will be actively involved as volunteers greeting the audience, handing out programs, and helping backstage and in the dressing room.

As we are ending our conversation at Vidya's apartment, she expresses concern about her stamina and ability to perform the full-length recital, but says that every step of the way, Jai has assured her of his confidence in her:

> I keep telling [Jai] all the time. And he's like, 'Chill! You'll do fine! I'm taking you there! You're going to reach there!' I get these panic attacks *(laughs)*. I send him emails saying I need to practice the whole show every day for the next two weeks. And then I go for class and I can't do three pieces. But he says, 'I'm taking you there!'[109]

[109] Vidya Kotamraju Personal Interview, May 30, 2007

Figure 1.1. Kiruthika Rathanaswami's *arangetram* invitation (front)

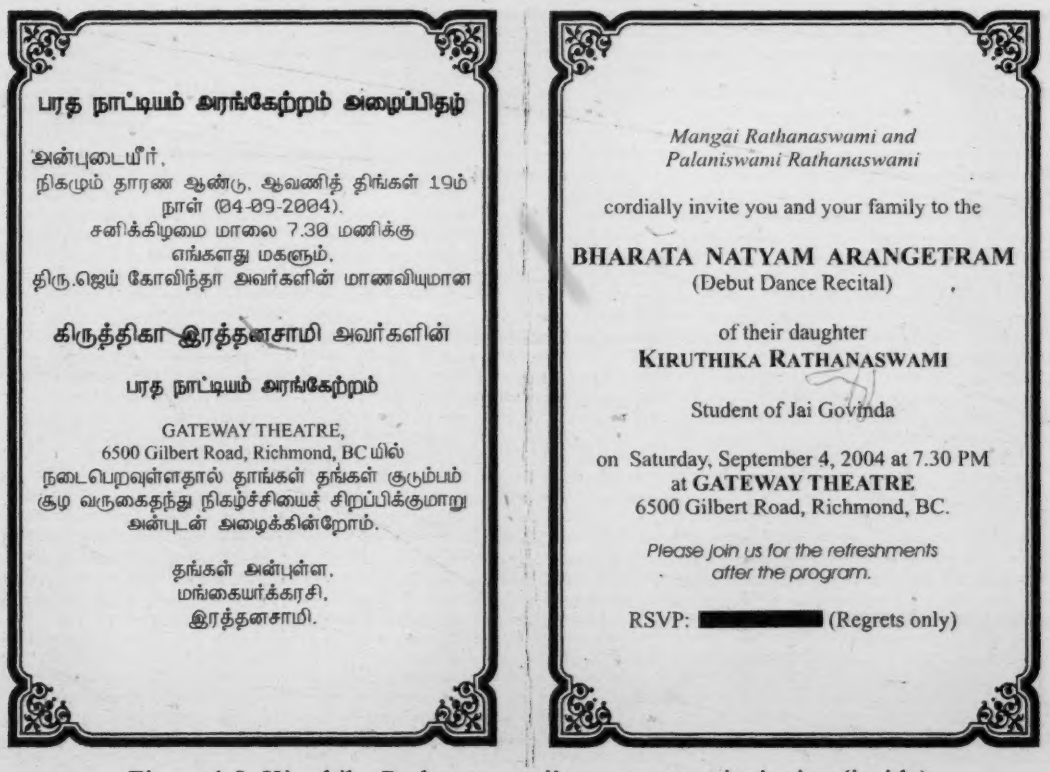

Figure 1.2. Kiruthika Rathanaswami's *arangetram* invitation (inside)

Figure 2. Kiruthika Rathanaswami's *arangetram* program brochure (front)

Figure 3. Vidya Kotamraju's *arangetram* invitation (front)

CHAPTER 3

DANCE, DIASPORA AND DIFFERENCE: CONSTRUCTING INDO-CANADIAN IDENTITY

3.1 A QUESTION OF IDENTITY

Just hours before a recent performance for the annual International Week Concert at the University of Alberta, I was sitting in the nearly empty Myer Horowitz Theatre, waiting for my sound check. As I was putting on my *ghunghroos*[110], a young man sitting behind me leaned forward and asked if I came from India. I replied that my parents were both born in India and that I was born in Canada. He immediately shook his head and said, "I hate that. I hate it when people say that. 'My parents are Indian, but I'm American.'" I replied that he did not ask if I was Indian. And while I would have replied that yes I am Indian, I had in fact never lived in India. He was not convinced and went on to tell me that I did not deserve to wear the *ghunghroos* I had just put on. I was both offended and intrigued.

Remembering my fieldwork interviews, I told him that I had met a number of girls who had been born in India who would not consider me to be "from India." In fact, one in particular had remarked that being Indian means, "being born and brought up in India." In my conversations with Bharatanatyam students—both Canadian-born and Indian-born—I had heard countless unique perceptions of Indian identity.

While the incident recounted above was certainly not the first time that someone had inquired about my cultural background, it was the first time in a while that I felt I had to both define and defend my own perception of myself. I had been raised by Indian parents, but spoke only English for my entire childhood. I grew up

[110] Sets of bells worn around the ankles in Indian classical dance.

eating Indian food and wearing Indian clothes to attend Indian cultural events, but I also spent the majority of my life studying Western classical piano and flute, and completed a Bachelor of Music degree in Voice Performance. At the same time, I had spent the last several years travelling to India during summers to learn Bharatanatyam, and had been teaching Bharatanatyam classes at the University of Alberta for the past four years. In a sense, I had grown up living the so-called "hyphenated-Canadian" experience. Yes, I was Indian, but I couldn't deny the fact that there were also aspects of my life that had nothing to do with India. Was this a bad thing? Was I denying my heritage? To me, the bottom line was that there was simply more to my story.

The young man in the Myer Horowitz Theatre, upon hearing that I had travelled to India to learn Bharatanatyam, suddenly changed his opinion and decided that I was, in fact, "in touch" with my culture. Was it really that simple? Did my experience with Bharatanatyam make me any more "Indian" than other Canadian-born Indians? Did my experience with Western classical music make me any less "Indian"? Within the span of ten minutes or so, I had been first scolded, then applauded, by a complete stranger based on a very limited conversation about where I "came from." Somehow, my engagement with cultural activities—both Western and Indian—created some sort of perception of who I was. So, who was I, really?

3.2 THE INDIAN DIASPORA: AN ETHNOMUSICOLOGICAL APPROACH

N. Jayaram identifies two major phases of emigration from India. The first was the colonial phase of overseas emigration in the 19th century, which included labour immigration to: Ceylon; Malaya; the British colonies of British Guiana, Fiji,

Trinidad and Jamaica; the French colonies of Guadalupe and Martinique; and the Dutch colony of Surinam. This phase also included emigration from Gujarat and Punjab to South Africa and East Africa.[111] The second or "post-colonial" phase of migration (to industrially developed countries in the 20th century) has received the most attention in literature, and can be further divided into three patterns of movement:

1) emigration of Anglo-Indians to Australia and England
2) emigration of professionals and semi-professionals to the industrially advanced countries like the United States of America, England and Canada
3) emigration of skilled and unskilled labourers to West Asia[112]

The present study focuses on the second category, predominantly Indo-Canadian communities, as well as some comparison with Indo-American communities.

Diaspora theory gained considerable popularity in a number of academic fields from the 1980s onwards, and has been approached by scholars from a variety of standpoints. In fact, Rogers Brubaker refers to the multiplicity of definitions assigned to the term, diaspora, as: "a 'diaspora' diaspora—a dispersion of the meanings of the term in semantic, conceptual and disciplinary space."[113] Despite this, Brubaker identifies three basic elements that are commonly found in most theoretical discourse and definitions of diaspora: 1) dispersion in space; 2) orientation to a 'homeland'; 3) boundary-maintenance.[114]

Dispersion is the most common criterion found in diaspora literature, as the term 'diaspora' itself is etymologically derived from the Greek *diasperien*: "from *dia-*

[111] Jayaram 2004, p. 21
[112] Ibid.
[113] Brubaker 2005, p. 1
[114] Ibid., p. 5

, 'across' and *-sperien*, 'to sow or scatter seeds.'"[115] While, in this sense, dispersion usually indicates forced or voluntary movement across state borders, Brubaker notes that metaphorical extensions of the term have come to encompass dispersion within state borders as well.[116] Orientation to a homeland (whether real or imagined) was the predominant focus of much early scholarship in diaspora studies. In the inaugural issue of the journal *Diaspora* in 1991, William Safran's article, "Diasporas in modern societies: Myths of homeland and return," discusses the maintenance of a collective memory and view of the homeland as "the true, ideal home and as the place to which one would (or should) eventually return."[117] However, Brubaker notes that James Clifford later criticizes Safron's emphasis on homeland orientation, because it does not reflect the experience of all diasporic people, most notably the dispersed Jewish population.[118] The notion of boundary-maintenance has also been treated in contrasting ways. Often, a diasporic community can be seen as distinct from the host society either through intentional resistance to assimilation, or as a result of social exclusion.[119] At the same time, Brubaker identifies "a strong counter-current [that] emphasizes hybridity, fluidity, creolization and syncretism," which has led to, "a tension in the literature between boundary-maintenance and boundary-erosion."[120]

R. Radhakrishnan explores the negotiation of identity among second-generation Indians growing up in the United States. After numerous conversations with American-born Indian youth, he reports that many of them expressed a strong

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[115] Braziel and Mannur 2003, p. 1
[116] Brubaker 2005, p. 5
[117] Safran 1991, pp. 83-84
[118] Brubaker 2005, pp. 5-6; Clifford 1994, pp. 305-306
[119] Brubaker 2005, p. 6
[120] Ibid.

sense of being exclusively Indian while growing up, as a result of their belief that they may never be considered first-class American citizens:

> Most of them felt they could not escape being *marked* as different by virtue of their skin color, their family background, and other ethnic and unassimilated traits. Many of them recited the reality of a double life, the ethnic private life and the "American" public life, with very little mediation between the two [emphasis in original].[121]

For Rena Boggaram, a Bharatanatyam student who was born and raised in Richmond, British Columbia, the sense of negotiating a double-identity has been especially prominent whenever she has been asked to explain her cultural background:

> When people in Canada ask me where I'm from, I'll say I was born here but my parents are from India. And then when I'm in India, and they ask where are you from [or] what are you, I say I'm Canadian.[122]

Sunil Bhatia examines the various ways in which difference or "otherness" is constructed and assigned in the Indian diaspora in the United States, and identifies three predominant trends: generic otherness, marked otherness and disruptive otherness.[123] Generic otherness can be assigned by external voices of friends and neighbours in purposefully bringing attention to points of cultural difference. For example, the limiting of conversations to topics relating to India or assumptions about an Indian's desire to "return home" accentuates the position of an Indian as the "other," thus presenting a perception of assumed difference.[124] Bhatia observes that this assignation of difference is practised in both directions as many Indian professionals, in turn, ascribe generic otherness to Americans.[125] Marked otherness can be assigned by more specific identifying characteristics. As Bhatia notes,

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[121] Radhakrishnan 2003, p. 122
[122] Rena Boggaram Personal Interview, May 27, 2007
[123] Bhatia 2007, p. 113
[124] Ibid., p. 118
[125] Ibid., p. 123

"cultural markers such as religion, dress, physical appearance, and accents become the basis on which the story of difference and foreignness is formulated."[126] Disruptive otherness refers to more direct assignation of difference motivated by racism and ethnic bias. This often results in "deep feelings of alienation and marginality,"[127] and can be experienced by both first- and second-generation members of the Indian diaspora. I wish to explore the second and third trends—the notions of marked and disruptive otherness—and examine how assignations of difference play into the construction of identity among second-generation Indian girls participating in Bharatanatyam classes alongside other educational and recreational pursuits.

Ethnomusicological investigation of diasporic music practices can provide valuable insight on music's role in identity formation. As Thomas Turino observes:

> The children of immigrant and diaspora communities often feel a kind of displacement—not 'really' belonging to the 'old country' and not really belonging to the 'new home' either. The problem of locating, recognizing, oneself is often realized through the creation of artistic forms that, in their very makeup, serve as a model for the new composite identities.[128]

Tina K. Ramnarine, in her overview of ethnomusicological studies on musical performance in the diaspora, states that "identity" provides:

> a stumbling block to rather more radical reconceptualizations that might be fostered by the diasporic turn within ethnomusicology, for the people we work with also assert, celebrate and maintain 'diasporic identities'. The diasporic subject is thus constructed as different from all sides.[129]

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[126] Ibid., p. 139
[127] Ibid., p. 113
[128] Turino 2004, p. 14
[129] Ramnarine 2007, p. 3

Ramnarine notes that the notion of a multicultural society itself "places the diasporic subject in a category of difference. Embedded in the ideology of 'multi' is the contradiction of all living together, all different."[130]

Kofi Agawu, who observes that "Ethnomusicology is founded on difference,"[131] problematizes the assumption of difference by scholars of Africanist ethnomusicology in their perception of research subjects and their musical practices. Agawu notes that there is an inevitable inequality of power established—generally favouring the scholar of the West over the subject of the East—when points of difference are presented as a natural framework for scholarly investigation. Illustrating this point, he states that differences

> are not simply there for the perceiving subject. We do not perceive in a vacuum. Categories of perception are made, not given. Every act of perception carries implicit baggage from a history of habits of constructing the world.[132]

Ultimately, Agawu suggests resisting difference by "embracing sameness"[133]—a concept to which I will return as this chapter develops.

The notion of hybridity is especially prominent in literature dealing with second-generation youth of the Indian diaspora. Stuart Hall describes the diaspora experience as:

> defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference [emphasis in original].[134]

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[130] Ibid., p. 2
[131] Agawu 2003, p. 152
[132] Ibid., p. 164
[133] Ibid., p. 168
[134] Hall 2003, p. 244

Gregory Diethrich's study of "desi music"[135] in Chicago examines the role of hybridized music in the articulation of identity among Indo-American youth. Drawing a parallel between the construction of desi culture and Turino's model for nationalist movements[136], Diethrich demonstrates the need for a new hybrid form of music due to the fact that neither American popular music nor Indian popular music alone could fully represent Indo-American youth. He discusses the dual function of desi music in response to both internal and external needs. Internally, he notes that desi music "has supported the continuation of an Indian diasporic identity … in a context that is new, personal, and meaningful for these youth." Externally, this music can be seen as "a means of consolidating and unifying a previously much more diffuse young Indian population, allowing for a sense of belonging and security amidst an American culture that at times has made them feel like outsiders, the objects of prejudice and stereotypes."[137]

Diethrich also states that the immense popularity of music from Bollywood (Hindi films) amongst Indo-American youth, and the incorporation of this music into hybridized desi music, further contributes to an imagined or constructed sense of Indian culture. Since Bollywood represents "the most important source of homeland imagination"[138] for Indian youth in the diaspora, Hindi films provide an instant return

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[135] The term 'desi' is derived "from the Hindi *deśi*, meaning 'from the country' or 'local'; it is used currently … to refer to nearly anything from or related to India." Diethrich 2004, p. 109

[136] Turino's model shows nationalists' aim to balance the 'traditional' and the 'modern' through "a synthesis of the 'best' or 'most valuable' aspects of local 'traditional' culture and 'the best' of foreign 'modern' lifeways and technologies." Turino 2000, p. 16

[137] Diethrich 2004, p. 107

[138] Ibid., p. 106

to an imaginary homeland that is "idealized simultaneously as traditional and cosmopolitan."[139]

Rena Boggaram, who has learned Bharatanatyam at the Jai Govinda Dance Academy in Vancouver, notes that the community and environment in which she was raised played a significant role in determining the extent of her exposure to popular desi culture:

> Had I lived on [the other] side of No. 3 Road, or even one block down, I probably would have gone to a school where 50-60% of the kids would have been Indian, like Sikh Punjabi. But on this side of the road, I was one of two Indian girls in our grade. ... If I had lived [in the other neighbourhood], I think I would have been more into the Bollywood scene.[140]

Drawing from subculture theory, Sunaina Maira notes that desi music provides a means for second-generation Indian youth to engage with Indian culture and to "mediate between the expectations of immigrant parents and those of mainstream American peer culture."[141] However, for Canadian-born Bharatanatyam students such as Rena Boggaram, there is no mediation between their engagement with classical Indian dance and mainstream culture. Rather, through their experience with Bharatanatyam, second-generation girls find their own niche within the diasporic Indian community, in which they perform an ethnicized Indian identity in the presence of first-generation Indian immigrants.

Rena Boggaram's parents immigrated to Canada from the South Indian province of Karnataka in the 1970s. Rena recalls that during her childhood in the 1980s, there were only about eight Kannada-speaking families from Karnataka living

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[139] Ibid., p. 106
[140] Rena Boggaram Personal Interview, May 27, 2007
[141] Maira 2005a, p. 232

in Richmond. This close-knit community would hold informal gatherings at the home of a different family every month. At these gatherings, the families would socialize, have South Indian food, and converse almost exclusively in Kannada. The parents would often ask their children who were receiving training in Western or Indian music and dance to give a small performance for the other families.[142]

Today, the Kannada-speaking population in Richmond and Vancouver has expanded considerably, and the community has formed a Kannada Association that regularly holds cultural events for special occasions such as *Diwali*. As Rena grew and attended Bharatanatyam lessons, she found that the Kannada Association served as a place for her to connect with the Kannada-speaking community through her dance performances:

> That's where I used to dance actually, and that was my biggest audience. People from your own community that supported you … That's where I would display what I knew, what I'd been learning, and where I'd hear our language being spoken more.[143]

Rena's experience performing for local *Diwali* programs can be examined from an ethnomusicological standpoint, in a manner similar to Henry Johnson's study of *Diwali* festivals in New Zealand. Drawing upon the work of Mary Louise Pratt, Richard Schechner and Victor W. Turner, Johnson characterizes public *Diwali* festivals as "sites or contact zones, where cultures meet, and where identity display is at the nucleus of performance—cultural and social."[144] Johnson suggests rethinking

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[142] Rena Boggaram Personal Interview, May 27, 2007
[143] Ibid.
[144] Johnson 2007, p. 72

the investigation of festivals in diaspora contexts, "in light of linking music to identity construction and expressions of self and collective identity."[145]

Within the context of the Kannada Association, the *Diwali* event itself serves a unique purpose in that it is attended by members of the Kannada-speaking community in the Vancouver area—not an outsider audience. While multicultural festivals can be viewed as a means for a diasporic community to distinguish itself as separate from its host society (characterized by a sense of unfamiliarity in the audience), the events held by the Kannada Association serve to cultivate a sense of collective identity within a diasporic community (characterized by a sense of familiarity in the audience). Turino describes the function of formal immigrant cultural associations as a support system for immigrant communities, emphasizing "cultural practices and styles from the original home as indices and activities that unite and maintain the group in the new location."[146] For Rena, as well as for numerous other second-generation Indo-Canadian youth, Bharatanatyam training has provided a means to actively participate in the formation of a social space within Indian communities in Canada. This ties into the aforementioned notion of diasporic boundary-maintenance (Brubaker 2005), as well as the celebration of diasporic identities (Ramnarine 2007), which both construct diasporic individuals as "different."

Many first-generation immigrant mothers recall being sent for music or dance lessons while growing up in India for the specific purpose of being considered more "marketable" as brides. When arranging marriages, families would invite a

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[145] Johnson 2007, p. 74
[146] Turino 2003, p. 59

prospective groom to their homes and ask their daughters (the prospective brides) to sing a song or perform a dance. In almost all cases, music and dance training ceased immediately after a marriage was arranged. A number of parents noted that the daughter often did not choose to learn music or dance, as the decision was primarily made by the parents. However, girls that did express an interest in continuing their training were highly discouraged to do so after marriage. In Canada, the initial decision to send girls for Bharatanatyam classes is also primarily motivated by parents, although for many second-generation Indian girls, Bharatanatyam training is only one of countless extra-curricular activities such as sports or western classical music lessons. As reported by Rena's mother, Bindu Boggaram, the initial gatherings among Kannada-speaking families in Richmond often featured children's performances of western piano and violin as frequently as Indian semi-classical and *filmi* (Bollywood) dance.

3.3 INDO-CANADIAN IDENTITY: IN SEARCH OF "SAMENESS"

Outside of her Bharatanatyam training, Rena Boggaram grew up with some exposure to Hinduism, but says that she did not give it much thought:

> My parents have always practised and prayed at home. But we don't go to the temple as often. I've never really even asked that much … We have a *pooja* every year and I always sit and I do it with them, but I guess it's partly my fault too, that I never asked.

For families such as Rena's, Bharatanatyam training has provided a means for opening dialogue between parents and children about Indian culture. Rena's mother, Bindu Boggaram, says that she formed a close bond with Rena while driving her to dance lessons:

> While going in the car we would talk about the dance. Then all these little stories of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* would come. Then she would ask me questions. How is this? How is that? And whatever I knew I would tell her.[147]

Rena expresses that when growing up in Canada, she found that there was an expectation from her Caucasian friends that she should have general knowledge about figures of Christianity. Since there were no classes in religious studies, comparable with Sunday school, Indo-Canadian children did not formally learn about the in-depth stories of Hinduism:

> All the stories I've learned, all the mythology, most of it has been through dance ... it's been a really eye-opening experience in that way, because I've gotten to learn more about my culture and my heritage ... in that respect it's been phenomenal.[148]

Even more phenomenal is the fact that, in Vancouver, many Indian girls learning Bharatanatyam are receiving this education and exposure to Indian culture from a French-Canadian, white man—Jai Govinda. While Jai's students comment that he must work twice as hard to be recognized in his field "because of his colour,"[149] they also observe that most people accept him as an expert immediately upon watching him dance or even spending time with him. Ishwarya remarks: "Even if you go to his home, there's nothing white about his home except for him!"[150] Bindu Boggaram—mother of Bharatanatayam student, Rena Boggaram—has observed that Jai knows more in-depth details of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* than most Indian parents.[151] Speculating that perhaps Jai was "Indian in his past life," Ishwarya

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[147] Bindu Boggaram Personal Interview, May 27, 2007
[148] Rena Boggaram Personal Interview, May 27, 2007
[149] Ishwarya Chaitanya Personal Interview, May 28, 2007
[150] Ibid.
[151] Bindu Boggaram Personal Interview, May 27, 2007

commends Jai for acquiring and passing on knowledge that many women in India did not themselves bother to seek:

> It's sad that women who were brought up in [India], it's all right there, all they had to do was look outside and, oh look, there's a temple. Not a McDonald's or a Starbucks. It was all right there.[152]

Even in India, many children do not receive any formal education in Hinduism. Vidya Kotamraju, like many others in her generation who have grown up in India, attributes her knowledge of Hinduism to comic books:

> We used to have this series of comic books, *Amar Chitra Katha*. My mom actually got the whole thing, so I used to read all these stories. So that's how I got the knowledge, because in school they don't really teach you.[153]

Vidya notes that while grandparents occasionally tell stories, parents do not often sit down with their children to do this. Referring to children in India today, Vidya's mother says: "[They] don't know our culture. They are away from it."[154] However, she observes that even in India, girls who learn Bharatanatyam are "more connected to the stories, these mythological stories, and the culture is now in them."[155]

Vanaja Dhruvarajan's study of second-generation Indo-Canadians discusses the tendency for first-generation Indian parents to "consider their own cultural values as superior to that of the dominant culture of the North American society," [156] and to experience anxiety that their children will not cherish the same values. Bharatanatyam student, Vidya Kotamraju, remarks: "I think a lot of parents [in Canada] just put their kids into it [dance classes] saying, okay I'm not in India, so I need to be more Indian

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[152] Ishwarya Chaitanya Personal Interview, May 28, 2007
[153] Vidya Kotamraju Personal Interview, May 30, 2007
[154] Manju Kotamraju Personal Interview, May 30, 2007
[155] Ibid.
[156] Dhruvarajan 2003, p. 169

than what I am."[157] This notion of being "more Indian" when living outside of India also came up in casual conversation with the girls at the Jai Govinda Dance Academy with reference to second-generation youth, as many observed that they often seem more "traditional" than youth currently living in India, who are heavily influenced by Bollywood and popular culture. As Rena remarks:

> Sometimes we here are more Indian than Indians there. I think when you're so far away from your origins, you try to hold on and grab on to as much as you possibly can. I think Indian dance is just a way to do that.[158]

Already, there seems to be a number of perspectives in play here. There is a general assumption that second-generation Indian youth growing up in Canada will be disconnected from their Indian cultural background because of their immersion in western culture and constant association with Canadian youth while growing up. Many girls are sent to Bharatanatyam classes by their first-generation immigrant parents who are anxious that their daughters will otherwise grow up without exposure to Indian culture, as observed in field interviews and in diaspora literature (Dhruvarajan 2003). Through dance training, these girls gain a cultural education through implicit exposure to Hinduism, *Karnatik* music and dance theory. This education, in fact, appears to surpass the cultural knowledge of the majority of youth in India, who, despite their location, are increasingly influenced by western popular culture and do not receive a formal education in what we seem to keep referring to as "Indian culture." Moreover, Indo-Canadian girls who are pursuing Bharatanatyam in Canada feel a strong sense of obligation to uphold the authenticity of their cultural

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[157] Vidya Kotamraju Personal Interview, May 30, 2007
[158] Rena Boggaram Personal Interview, May 27, 2007

practice, expressing disapproval of "watered-down" or semi-classical dance masquerading as classical art in the diaspora.

To complicate matters further, there also appears to be some contradiction regarding the sense of belonging to the distant or "imagined" homeland (Safran 1991, Brubaker 2005) in the minds of diasporic youth. Despite their "connection to Indian culture" through Bharatanatyam training, the Canadian-raised girls did recognize cultural and behavioural differences between themselves and people they encountered when visiting India. They remarked that in India, they were immediately identified as "foreigners" despite the fact that they looked Indian and, in most cases, could speak the local language. However, the same girls all responded in the affirmative when asked, "Do you feel at home in India?"

I was curious as to what cultivated this sense of belonging—this sense of "home"—in a distant land. For most girls, it came down to the fact that nearly all of their relatives lived in India, so they were able to experience a sense of connection to family. Kiruthika Rathanaswami likened her experience in India to the feeling of being in a dream, in the sense that she felt she was a "different self":

> When you step out the doors of the airport, you can't be yourself like you are here. It's like another you. You can't be who you are.[159]

Like Rena and Kiruthika, Ishwarya grew up in a neighbourhood with a predominantly Caucasian population and did not see many other Indians at school. When she began undergraduate studies, she was immediately exposed to a greater Indian population. Rather than feeling a sense of community with these Indian

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[159] Kiruthika Rathanaswami Personal Interview, May 27, 2007

students, however, she felt that many were hostile towards her and made her feel like an outsider:

> All of a sudden, out of high school, there were Indian people everywhere. I was like, where did they come from? But the girls were just so mean. Because sometimes I would wear Indian clothes, and they would just look at you and whisper to each other and look at you … Really mean.[160]

Different among Indians in India, different among Indians in Canada. Different among non-Indians everywhere. How does this preoccupation with difference affect the ways in which identity is constructed for diasporic individuals? And how can this be challenged, by embracing "sameness," as suggested by Kofi Agawu?

To engage with Agawu's challenging of "difference," I return once again to Sunil Bhatia's study of the Indian diaspora in the United States. It has been observed that some members of the Indian diaspora do respond to their ethnic assignments by conversely asserting their "sameness" to their host society. An example of such an assertion can be seen in Indian professionals who view themselves primarily as doctors, engineers, scientists or professors that just "happened to be from India."[161] In this sense, these Indians viewed their race and culture as unrelated and therefore irrelevant to their professional lives. Bhatia encountered numerous Indian professionals who believed that they would have hindered their progress in their careers if they had cultivated their assigned "otherness" by socializing only with other Indians or viewing themselves as inherently different from their co-workers. One in particular criticized Indians' lack of initiative in "breaking out of their comfort zone,"

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[160] Ishwarya Chaitanya Personal Interview, May 28, 2007
[161] Bhatia 2007, p. 159

and networking with white professionals in national conferences and professional organizations.[162]

Kiruthika Rathanaswami, an undergraduate student at the University of British Columbia, has been involved with recreational sports since childhood and plans to pursue higher education and a career in the field of Human Kinetics. She remarks that it would have been highly unlikely for her to pursue such interests if she had been raised in India, and presents this as an example of how growing up in Canada has helped shape her identity. She says that while learning Bharatanatyam may possibly be more spiritual for other students, for her it is first and foremost a sport:

> When I'm in my zone and [dancing], it's like, you forget about everything. … When I'm practicing my *adavus*, it's like a workout.[163]

Kiruthika's participation in sports parallels my own experience of training in Western classical music. In both of our cases, we have engaged in activities that are not in any way directly related to our ethnic or cultural backgrounds as South Indians, and have pursued higher education in these respective disciplines. Within our academic or professional fields, it is perhaps conceivable for each of us to construct our individual identity as an athlete or musician who "just happens to be Indian." However, I believe there is more at play here. Diasporic individuals who engage with both Indian and western cultural practices find themselves inhabiting multiple social and cultural spaces. What emerges is, in fact, not a hybrid identity that fuses opposing cultural experiences. Rather, diasporic individuals pursuing parallel cultural practices experience an integrated, yet composite, sense of identity, and can therefore feel at

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[162] Ibid., p. 167
[163] Kiruthika Rathanaswami Personal Interview, May 19, 2007

home in various diverse cultural settings without any perceived need to mediate between opposing identities.

While Agawu recommends the embracing of "sameness," he stops short of offering a concrete suggestion as to what this "sameness" may entail. Within the context of diasporic individuals engaging in diverse cultural practices, it is useful to think of "sameness" as a means for contesting the construction of ethnicized identity based on points of cultural difference. In the past, I have encountered people who have commented on the "novelty" of my choice, as a person of Indian origin, to pursue western classical music. Such comments reflect a perception of my identity derived from an ethnicization of both my cultural practices and myself. By asserting a "sameness" of experience across cultural practices, we need no longer define identity within an "ours vs. theirs" framework; thus, we may avoid problematic definitions such as "an *Indian* girl singing *western* opera," or "a *Canadian*-born girl performing *Indian* dance." A move to de-ethnicize cultural practices would provide a practical interconnection between domains previously bounded by notions of cultural difference. In this sense, I argue that the quest to embrace "sameness" need not be interpreted as a denial of distinct cultural backgrounds. Rather, asserting "sameness" allows diasporic individuals to make a case for a new construction of identity that is not limited by assignations of assumed difference.

CHAPTER 4

BECOMING THE GODDESS—DANCE AND EMBODIMENT OF FEMININE IDENTITY

4.1 GENDER, SEXUALITY AND THE FEMININE BODY

Previously in this study, I have investigated how identity can be sustained or negotiated through the practice and performance of Bharatanatyam within the Indian diaspora of Canada. In this chapter, I examine the specific, codified movements of Bharatanatyam derived from dance theory and practice, and explore the ways in which repetition of these actions—through Bharatanatyam transmission and *arangetram* performance—has come to embody a social and physical process whereby gendered identity is articulated among Indo-Canadian girls.

As discussed in the previous chapter, for many Canadian-born Indian girls of Hindu families, exposure to Hinduism is limited or non-existent in the home environment. A number of Bharatanatyam dance students have stated that their dance training is the sole means through which they are introduced to the stories and characters of Hindu literature and mythology. However, this is not the case for Ishwarya Chaitanya, a Bharatanatyam student at the Jai Govinda Dance Academy in Vancouver.

As the daughter of a Hindu priest, Ishwarya finds herself inextricably immersed in the cultural traditions of the Vancouver Shree Mahalakshmi Temple. During our interview in her home, she gestures frequently towards the wall, indicating that her father's temple is the adjacent building to her house. Sitting at her

kitchen table, wearing a *bindi* and traditional *salwar kameez*, Ishwarya appears to be connected—both in cultural experience and physical proximity—to the temple.

Ishwarya was born in Canada, but at the age of four months, she moved with her grandparents to India, where she was raised and schooled until the age of eight. She began Bharatanatyam classes during her last year in India, and then continued her training in Vancouver under French-Canadian Bharatanatyam instructor, Jai Govinda. Ishwarya completed her *arangetram* in 2001 at the age of 15, and has continued to train with Jai Govinda to the present day. Having been raised in India, Ishwarya finds herself in a unique position in comparison with the other girls in the Dance Academy. While many Canadian-raised girls find that Bharatanatyam is a means for connecting with the Indian community through performances at temples and cultural events, Ishwarya finds Bharatanatyam to be an escape from the Indo-Canadian community of her temple—a community that is, in her eyes, far removed from India:

> My dance and the community I like to keep separate ... for me it doesn't really have a connection, because the people who come to the temple that are my age have been born and brought up here, so they're completely different. I don't really feel a community with them ... I perform in the temple, but because it's the temple, not because of whoever's there.[164]

Ishwarya cannot help but notice cultural differences between herself and Indian girls raised in Canada:

> The society itself is so different. Because I grew up there [in India], I always felt like they [Indian girls] should be a certain way. But they're not, and it's not their fault. But for a long time that's why I never had any Indian friends.[165]

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[164] Ishwarya Chaitanya Personal Interview, May 28, 2007
[165] Ibid.

While she has found it difficult to identify with the Indo-Canadian girls at her school and temple, Ishwarya has formed strong friendships with the Canadian-raised students at her Bharatanatyam dance academy. She finds that she has been able to connect with these girls because they have all shared the same commitment to learning Bharatanatyam over an extended period of time. Ishwarya finds that although most of these girls have been brought up in Canada, they have come to adopt traditional values and respectful behaviour through their training:

> All of us have been there for over ten years. So that's a long time to dedicate to that ... I don't know if you can really become Indian because you're learning Indian dance. What does it even mean to be Indian? That itself doesn't have much of a meaning because [India] itself is more diverse than Canada. But at the same time it's an interest, it's an art form ... [and] they all work hard.[166]

Vidya Kotamraju shares this observation:

> What is really amazing is that they [the girls in Jai's Studio] are all from different families, but they have the same kind of values in a way, and I think it's mainly because of him [Jai].[167]

Thus, in addition to providing dance training as a Bharatanatyam instructor, Jai Govinda also creates a social space within his dance studio, in which Indo-Canadian girls, otherwise removed from their cultural ties to India, can experience a shared sense of community and connection to Indian culture.

Ishwarya does have a distinct perception of how she believes Indian girls should behave: "more gentle and caring, quiet, decent, wearing decent clothes, being respectful, not flirting with boys every day."[168] Ishwarya's perception of ideal Indian feminine behaviour reflects a common attitude among many Indians living in

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[166] Ibid.
[167] Vidya Kotamraju Personal Interview, May 30, 2007
[168] Ishwarya Chaitanya Personal Interview, May 28, 2007

Canada—the desire to hold onto a feminine identity that does not necessarily reflect the current situation in India, but that is maintained in the minds of those who have left India. The practice of Bharatanatyam, both in India and in the diaspora, provides a means for dancers to maintain this ideal through the physical process of embodying a historical Indian feminine identity.

As Alexandra Carter states, the focus of much feminist theory has been analysis of the "female body as the site of construction of the gendered image."[169] When applied to dance, this entails examination of the ways in which "images of women are (re)presented and the relationship between these images and the roles and status of women in society."[170] Carter further expresses that the values of the dance world can also be examined in terms of its broader cultural context to further investigate the position of women.[171]

Drawing from feminist theory of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler states that:

> To be a woman is to have *become* a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project [emphasis in original].[172]

Within the context of Bharatanatyam, this notion of woman as a "historical idea"[173] resonates with my observations both as a researcher and as a dancer. The majority of *abhinaya*, or expression-based dance compositions, require the dancer to portray female characters—most often, characters drawn from Hindu literature and

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[169] Carter 1998, p. 247
[170] Ibid.
[171] Ibid.
[172] Butler 1988, p. 522
[173] Ibid.

mythology. As pointed out by Kalanidhi Narayanan, the world's leading authority on the performance of *abhinaya*: "Most of the poetry for dance is written by men expressing the feelings of women and treating the God as lover."[174] In addition to composing the poetry for dance, men were also the teachers and theorists of dance. As Mandakranta Bose observes:

> That dance was created and controlled by men but performed by women underlies the paradox that classical Indian dancing began as and remains for the most part an androcentric domain populated by women.[175]

The process of learning to portray physically these female characters of dance poetry entails repetition of stylized movements, postures, facial expressions and hand gestures. So in learning Bharatanatyam, dance students are taught, not only technical, abstract movements, but also embodied codes of Indian feminine behaviour that have been established in dance theory and practice.

4.2 EMBODYING IDENTITY IN PERFORMANCE

In Bharatanatyam, movements are designated as "male" or "female" and categorized in two contrasting styles of dance: *tandava* (male dance of *Shiva*) and *lasya* (female dance of *Parvati*). These styles are incorporated into dance performances according to whether a male or female character is being portrayed, and both styles can be performed by either men or women when depicting stories. Thus, as Mandakranta Bose states, "dance in India was organized from the beginning along gender lines," as dance movements have been assigned gender values such as

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[174] Narayanan 1994, p. 38
[175] Bose 1998, p. 252

"masculine vigour" and "feminine grace."[176] It is often the *lasya*, or feminine style of dance in which the erotic sentiment of *sringara* (love) is developed.[177] Judith Lynne Hanna describes *sringara* as "a key sentiment implying the intimacy and secrets of desire and cause of all creation,"[178] and states that performing this sentiment:

> conveys the amorous mood through posture gait, gestures, sidelong glances, coquettish smiles, adornment, perfume and accompanying song. Natyasastra describes it as an offering and demonstration of love to God, a cleansing of sin, a path of salvation, a partaking of the cosmic control of the world, and an expression of God within. Adoration of God is embodied in the dancer's expression of erotic desires symbolic of union with the divine.[179]

For the majority of Bharatanatyam students, *abhinaya* poses a distinct challenge in early years of training. Many attribute this to a lack of life experience to portray the emotions in their dance compositions. Vidya Kotamraju shares a story from her dance lessons in India, in which she was learning an *abhinaya*-based composition. Her dance teacher was asking the students to depict the mood of *sringara* while performing the action of *Sita* placing a garland around *Rama*. Vidya explains that since she and her dance classmate were around twelve or thirteen years old at the time, they had great difficulty in portraying this mood:

> We did not get it right and she kept correcting us—two girls—me and another friend … we were too young. And she wanted us to have that shy, that kind of demure look, which we didn't have.[180]

Today, Vidya is a married woman in her late 20s, and she finds that she can express *sringara* more effectively simply because she has now had the experience of being in love. It is for this reason that Jai Govinda felt Vidya would be capable of

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[176] Ibid., p. 251
[177] Hanna 1998, p. 203
[178] Ibid., p. 103
[179] Ibid.
[180] Vidya Kotamraju Personal Interview, May 23, 2007

performing "*Manavi*," a traditional Telugu *varnam* composed by Ponniah of the Tanjore Quartet. For younger students, Jai generally prefers to teach *varnams* that depict *bhakti*, or devotion, as these students are often not yet mature enough for the more advanced *sringara*-based compositions. Jai states that Vidya is his first student to perform a Tanjore Quartet *varnam* for an *arangetram* because she is the first student to complete her *arangetram* as a more mature, married woman. This particular *varnam* depicts a heroine's great love and longing for *Shiva* in the form of *Brihadisvara*:

Pallavi	Verse 1
Manavi chei kona rada chakanì Swami na.	Will you not listen, beautiful Lord of my heart, to my loving prayers?
Mamatà miri yun na nurà.	My love for you never ceases to increase as you can see.
Anu Pallavi	Verse 2
Vinarà Sri Tanja-purinì velayò ma Brigadhisha.	Please listen, you who in the sacred town of Tanjore dwell, my beautiful Lord Brigadeeswarar.
Nee nu ne ra namì nanurà nikà muka madi lorù.	Upon you alone, endlessly/from many births, I keep all my thoughts and every single day, believe me, you are in my heart, I promise.
Sahittia	Text for *Swara*[181]
Nee neratanamu nee doratanamu neeke tabuna netsalasaga (Swami).	For your beauty and your regal elegance, you can be compared only to yourself, my Lord.
Aporunà madì bramasì virahamanò sagaramulò mukunchì teno chunnati.	And now my mind is wandering in madness, deep into the ocean of desire I sink, pitiful is my condition.
Charanam	Verse 3
Pan ta mela ra natò	In anger now you turn your face away from me. Tell me, why are you doing this to me?
Sahittia	Text for *Swara*
Swami ne sati dorà ne ka narà.	My Lord, I've never seen anyone who could be compared to you.
Sahittia	Text for *Swara*
Pancha sharudu vidu vanchi sharankunagù minchina velalò vanchàna ledikì.	The five flowers of Cupid's bow have pierced my heart and my suffering is deepening, how can this leave you so indifferent?
Sahittia	Text for *Swara*
Darà di patì yenì dora doralù pokanera karinjanula tara tarè meriki ira	In the entire universe you are the king of all the kings, as the poets sing, with magnanimity you

[181] *Swaras* are lines of melodic syllables or *sargam* (i.e. *sa, ri, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni*) that, in a *varnam*, are sung, then repeated with text in place of *sargam*.

Kalushi mella tira nabai tripa sudarà marulu michi nara nanu che kòra.	bestow fulfillment, you, remover of all difficulties, please show some compassion to me. See how my love is deep, please now come and take me with you.[182]

Another *abhinaya*-based dance in Vidya's *arangetram* program is the Kannada *padam*[183], "*Krishna Nee Begane*," which describes *Krishna* as a child. Following the text of the *padam*, the dancer takes on the role of *Yashoda* (*Krishna's* foster-mother) and watches *Krishna* with adoration, describing his adornments and entreating him to come. While Vidya feels she is now capable of expressing the sentiment of her *varnam*, she finds that her *padam* poses a different challenge:

> I think *Krishna Nee Begane* is a little challenging for me because I don't feel that motherly kind of love for a child yet. *Abhinaya* is always a challenge because you draw out of your experiences and put that onto your face … if you haven't faced that situation it's tough.[184]

Pallavi	*Pallavi*
Krishna nee bEganE baarO	Krishna! Come hither soon!
Anupallavi	*Anupallavi*
bEganE baarO mukavannu tOrO	Come hither soon! Show (me) your face!
Charanam 1	*Charanam 1*
kaalaalandhigE gejje niladhabaavuli	Beautiful anklets adorn your feet! Sapphire bracelets (on your arms)!
nilavarNane naaTya maaduta baarO	(Oh!)Blue coloured one, (Please) come hither dancing !
Charanam 2	*Charanam 2*
Odiyalli odigejje beraLalli ongura	Waistbands with bells adorn your waist! Ring(s) on your finger(s)!
koraLalli haakita vajayantimaalE	The (divine)Vaijayanthi necklace garlands your neck !
Charanam 3	*Charanam 3*
kaasi peeTambara kaiyalli koLalu	(Sacred)Saffron cloth from Kashi (covers you)! (a) flute in your hand(s)!
pushita shreegandha mayallOLagamma!	Oh dear! Your body is anointed with sandal paste!
Charanam 4	*Charanam 4*
taayige baayalli jagavannu torita	The one who showed his mother the universe in his mouth
jagadhOdhaaraka namma uDupi shree krishna	(that)Benefactor of the world (Is) our Udupi Shri Krishna![185]

[182] http://community.livejournal.com/devadasis/14391.html
[183] A lyric, *abhinaya*-based dance composition.
[184] Vidya Kotamraju Personal Interview, May 23, 2007
[185] Jayaram Suryanarayana, http://www.musicindiaonline.com/lr/1/1527/

The most common challenge expressed by Bharatanatyam teachers in Canada is the difficulty in drawing graceful, feminine movements and gestures out of Canadian-raised girls. In one of the private classes I observed at the Jai Govinda Dance Academy, Jai demonstrated the feminine movements of a particular character and expressed frustration when his Canadian-raised student could not execute the movements correctly. He later remarked to me, "This is a problem with all of my female students—I can be more feminine than they can."[186] Jai also commented that some of his female students are much better at performing the more masculine poses of *Shiva* than the graceful movements of *Parvati*. Some students believe their difficulty with executing feminine movement stems from the fact that most purely technical movements in Bharatanatyam are very poised and rigid. The training of *adavus* over several years requires great discipline and control to execute geometric formations of the arms and legs. Stylistically, the movements of *abhinaya*-based composition greatly contrast those of technical sequences or *jatis*. The majority of Canadian-raised students, however, feel that they are simply unfamiliar with the Indian feminine aesthetic required in *abhinaya*, because they do not experience it in their own natural behaviour. Rena Boggaram expresses her challenge in approaching *abhinaya*-based compositions:

> In India, the women are just so naturally feminine, in the way that they pick something up, or even when they wear a sari—you can naturally see the shape and the form of their body … So you have to get used to that idea of how you're going to walk and how you're trying to be more feminine and use your body.[187]

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[186] Fieldnotes, May 16, 2007
[187] Rena Boggaram Personal Interview, May 27, 2007

It is most significant to note that the codified feminine behaviour depicted through classical Indian dance has been established in dance treatises dating back to the *Natya Sastra*. In the text, Bharata outlines the seven natural graces of women that are to be depicted in the dance: beauty, charm, delicacy, radiance, self-control, courage, and dignity.[188] The *Natya Sastra* also classifies female characters as *Ashtanāyikās*, or, eight heroines that can be depicted in dance compositions. They are: *Vāsakasajjā* (a woman who adorns herself while waiting for her lover's return); *Virahotkanthitā* (a woman distressed because her lover has not returned); *Svādhinapatika* (a woman who is sure and proud of her husband); *Kalahāntaritā* (a woman who is separated from her lover due to a quarrel); *Khanditā* (a woman who sends away her deceitful lover in anger); *Vipralabdhā* (a woman who discovers that her lover is with another woman); *Proshitapatikā* (a woman who is unable to bear a temporary separation from her husband); and *Abhisārikā* (a woman who is impatient because her lover has not returned and gives up modesty to go to meet him).[189] As noted by Kalanidhi Narayanan: "It must be understood that a *nāyikā's* [woman's] standing is always relative to her *nayakā* [man]."[190]

The dance literature even establishes the ideal physical characteristics and qualifications to be possessed by a female dancer, as outlined in Nandikesvara's dance treatise, the *Abhinaya Darpana* (Mirror of Gesture):

> It is understood that the *nartakī* [female dancer] should be very lovely, young, with full round breasts, self-confident, charming, agreeable, dexterous in handling the critical passages, skilled in steps and rhythms, quite at home on the stage, expert in posing hands and body, graceful in gesture, with [large] eyes, able to follow song and

[188] Purecha 2003, p. 432.
[189] Narayanan 1994, p. 37; Purecha 2003, pp. 435-436
[190] Narayanan 1994, p. 38

> instruments and rhythm, adorned with costly jewels, with a charming lotus-face, neither very stout nor very thin, not very tall nor very short.[191]

The theory and practice of Bharatanatyam have been built on these principles, fostering an Indian feminine ideal encoded in aesthetics, physicality and behaviour. This ideal is maintained through dance transmission, and displayed through performance. When Indo-Canadian girls, then, take up this art form in the diaspora, they consequently embody social values attached to this ideal through the physical process of portraying an Indian girl. I argue that this process results in a new learned behaviour that emerges as a significant element of an Indo-Canadian girl's sense of Indian identity.

Kiruthika Rathanaswami has noticed that through the practice and performance of Bharatanatyam, Indo-Canadian girls develop new patterns of behaviour, influenced by their experience in dance:

> Most of us were brought up here ... We would have not acted how traditionally Indian women would act back in those days. Just going through that, I think a lot of the girls would have rethought things, and I think it changed them slowly, how to behave ... how to behave in public.[192]

Many Bharatanatyam teachers in Canada encourage their students to undergo intensive training in India for the dance experience as well as the cultural experience. A number of movements required of Bharatanatyam dancers in *abhinaya* compositions are derived from the daily routine actions of women in India. Rena Boggaram notes that her *abhinaya* improved vastly after spending time training in India because she was able to observe women living there:

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[191] Coomaraswamy 2003, pp. 15-16
[192] Kiruthika Rathanaswami Personal Interview, May 19, 2007

> I learned so much, like even the slightest movement of your eyes or your neck … When we're trying to do those [actions], like picking up a pot and putting it on your head—now here, would you ever really pick up a pot and put it on your head? Probably not.[193]

A number of students recognize a distinct change in the behaviour of girls who have gone to India for further training and then returned to Canada.

This leads me to the question of how identity can be negotiated and sustained through performance of this idealized feminine Indian behaviour by Canadian-born and Canadian-raised girls of the Indian diaspora. In the context of an *arangetram*, numerous *abhinaya*-based dance compositions make up a significant portion of the program. The calibre of a dancer is often measured by the quality of her *abhinaya* dances, which most Canadian Bharatanatyam students identify as the most challenging pieces for them to execute. The successful execution of these dance compositions in the presence of the first-generation immigrant community provides a significant sense of accomplishment and social validation for the Indo-Canadian dancer.

The *arangetram* performance itself has come to serve as proof in a public forum of an Indo-Canadian girl's connection with her Indian heritage. But more than this, I argue that the embodiment of constructed Indian identity, through the portrayal of Indian female characters by second-generation youth, provides first-generation audiences with the visual experience of a remembered past that is brought to life and sustained through *arangetram* performances.

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[193] Rena Boggaram Personal Interview, May 27, 2007

Kalpana Ram, a scholar and first-generation Indian immigrant living in Australia, describes her experience watching a classical dance production in which a dancer depicted an "Indian woman's bodily routines while rising in the morning":

> The fluent and practiced hand gestures that swiftly coil and knot the long sweep of hair, fingers judiciously re-applying *kumkum* to the forehead, the quick adjustments to the sari. These movements made me re-live an aspect of my past that would have otherwise stayed in the background, that of watching adult women in my family getting dressed and of anticipating those embodied cultural competencies.[194]

Thus, *arangetram* provides a means for defining a social space within the Indo-Canadian community, in which first-generation immigrants and second-generation youth actively experience Indian culture in a setting far removed from the homeland. Within the space of *arangetram*, first-generation immigrants experience an escape to their past, and second-generation youth provide this escape through performance of embodied codes of feminine Indian behaviour. For these Indo-Canadian girls, this process ultimately results in the construction of not just ethnicized, but also gendered Indian identity.

[194] Ram 2000, p. 270

CHAPTER 5

ASCENDING THE CANADIAN STAGE—VIDYA'S *ARANGETRAM*

5.1 THE EVENT

Backstage at the Frederic Wood Theatre in Vancouver, Vidya Kotamraju sits facing her reflection in the dressing room mirror. Her Bharatanatyam guru, Jai Govinda, has meticulously laid out her silk dance costume, temple jewelry, make-up, and garlands of orange and white flowers. With a playful smile, he makes a grand gesture towards Vidya and declares: "At 7:00, I'm going to change ***this*** *into a Goddess." As Jai begins to work on Vidya's transformation, Vidya presses the play button on her cassette player and closes her eyes as she listens to the opening strains of her invocation: Āngikam bhuvanam yasya, Vācikam sarvavāngamayam ... the familiar text, a traditional Sanskrit verse in praise of the cosmic dancer Lord Shiva, will accompany the first of seven solo dance items that Vidya will perform for an invited audience of 200 members from the Indo-Canadian community of the Vancouver area. Tonight is the culmination of years of dance training and countless hours of rehearsal as Vidya prepares to present her solo debut recital as a Bharatanatyam dancer—her arangetram.*

On the day of Vidya's *arangetram*, I arrive at the Frederic Wood Theatre just after noon to meet Jai. Vidya has been instructed by Jai to stay at home, sleep in and enjoy a leisurely morning while Jai and Vidya's family take care of preparations. The technician meets us at the theatre door and shows us the stage, dressing room and green room. Vidya's husband and brother unload various items from the car as Jai prepares the stage decorations: two 16-foot long panels of cloth that will hang from

the rafters and fall directly down to the floor, framing the stage on both sides. Decorative symbols have been painted on the earth-toned fabric in thick, white paint, evocative of the *kolam*[195] patterns I have seen on the floors in South India. Simple, but beautiful. An avid visual artist, Jai has designed these panels, along with Vidya's friend, Meera Shah, based on patterns he had seen in Chennai. As the panels of cloth are hoisted, Jai tells me that these will serve as the only decoration for the entire stage. Bindu Boggaram will later prepare the altar downstage left: a tall lamp with five small flames and a large statue of *Nataraj* (*Shiva* as cosmic dancer) surrounded by fresh flowers [see Figures 4.1 and 4.2].

At half past three o' clock, Vidya arrives at the theatre with her parents. Jai leads Vidya to the stage and walks through each dance item with her, planning her entrances and exits. Because the size of the rehearsal space in Jai's dance studio is considerably smaller than the theatre stage, Vidya must now gauge how much more freedom she has to move and decide how to make full use of the space. Jai discusses lighting options with the technician and begins to check the sound levels for the pre-recorded music accompaniment. The songs have been specially recorded in a studio in Bangalore and are all either from Jai's own choreographed repertoire, or from the repertoire he learned from his guru in India, Jamuna Krishnan.

The performance is now two hours away, and it is time for Vidya to get ready. We move to the dressing room, where Vidya takes a seat in front of the mirror and Jai begins the lengthy process. He stands behind Vidya and pulls her hair back into a low ponytail. As he places a synthetic hair bun at the back of Vidya's head, I am curious as to why there are no hairpins in sight. Jai smiles proudly as he tells me that he has

[195] Decorative white patterns on the ground or floor, drawn with rice flour

perfected a method of sewing the flowers and jewelry into place on the dancer's head without using a single hair pin. Reaching into a pile of thick black threads on the table, he takes one and carefully passes it through a large needle, then meticulously weaves the thread in and out of the bun, fastening it to Vidya's hair.

Jai begins to braid Vidya's ponytail, remarking that although her hair has grown since her last performance, it is still relatively short. He then picks up a long hair extension, running his fingers through it to smooth out any tangles, and begins to braid it into Vidya's hair, creating a long, thick braid that runs down Vidya's back, ending just past her waist. Before tying the braid, Jai weaves in a decorative end-piece. Reaching for the needle and thread once more, he sews around the joint where Vidya's real hair meets the extension, creating the illusion that this is Vidya's real braid. I find myself momentarily thinking of my aunts in India who chastise me for "cutting my hair short," and of my young cousins, who have no need of any hair extension when they dance because of their flowing, waist-length hair.

With Vidya's hair in place, after a few small touches of hair gel to catch any loose strands, Jai moves to the dance jewelry that has been arranged on the counter. He places the two small jewelled pieces on the upper sides of Vidya's head: the *chandra* or moon-shaped one on the left, the *surya* or sun-shaped one on the right. He then places the full *nethi chutti* head piece with the wide jewelled band running along Vidya's hairline and framing her face, the front jewel piece centred on Vidya's forehead, and the thinner jewelled band resting along the top of Vidya's hair where it has been parted in the centre. Meanwhile, Vidya puts on her large earrings with red stones that match the rest of her jewelry set. As Jai secures the jewelry in place with

the needle and thread, Vidya listens to the music for her *padam*, "*Yen palli kondiraiyya,*" on a small cassette player. The Tamil lyrics express the words of a *Vishnu* devotee who sees the deity in his famous reclining position and asks, "*Why are you lying this way? Are you tired?*" The lyrics go on to describe *Vishnu's* deeds from various episodes of the *Ramayana*, inquiring after each story, "*Is that why you are tired?*"

Jai asks Vidya how her parents are doing and she says that they are calm and not nervous about the evening. Jai remarks that they seem very grounded and mentions to me that he does not allow parents to enter the dressing room because they can often add to the dancer's anxiety, and he prefers to maintain a quieter, more relaxed atmosphere for the dancer to prepare for the performance. As if on cue, two past graduates of the Jai Govinda Dance Academy suddenly burst into the dressing room to greet Vidya with exuberant laughter. They chat with Vidya and each other until Jai, with a calm, but firm look, reminds them that the dressing room area is to remain quiet. After they leave, Jai begins to gather the artificial flowers for Vidya's hair. Vidya is in a state of complete concentration as she sits with an inward gaze, half miming her *mudras* and singing quietly to herself. She suddenly lets out an exhausted sigh and slumps her shoulders. Jai turns and looks at her inquisitively. Vidya looks up and smiles, "I was thinking of the *jatiswaram*." Jai bursts out laughing, and parodying the lyrics of "*Yen palli kondiraiyya*," he forms a questioning *mudra* with his hand and quips, "Is that why you are tired?"

Vidya continues to mentally review her dances, listening to the accompanying music on her cassette player. Jai places rings of orange and white flowers around the

hair bun on Vidya's head, and wraps a long garland of white flowers around the entire length of the braid. As Jai sews the flowers in place, Vidya covers her face and neck with a base coat of make-up. Jai takes over by accentuating Vidya's eyes with dramatic shading of the eyelids and thick, bold outlines painted in jet-black liquid eyeliner. He uses the same liner to shape Vidya's eyebrows, lengthening them to match the lines extending from her eyes. Jai then outlines Vidya's lips with a dark red liner [see Figure 5] and completes the look with bold red lipstick, blush, and a long, teardrop-shaped bindi centred on Vidya's forehead.

At this point Jai leaves to change into a *kurta*[196] and to check final details with the sound and light technician. Rena Boggaram, a past graduate of the Jai Govinda Dance Academy, enters the dressing room to help Vidya with her dance costume. For the first half of the program, Vidya will wear a white silk costume accented with a bright red border and gold embroidery. Her costume for the second half is laid out on the counter—bright, electric blue with a deep purple border and blouse. When Jai returns to the dressing room, he makes final adjustments to Vidya's costume and jewelry [see Figure 6] while Rena quickly touches up Vidya's make-up [see Figure 7]. With the program less than fifteen minutes away, the audience has already begun to file into the theatre hall.

Leaving Vidya to prepare for her performance, I join the audience in the auditorium. There is a crowd of approximately 200 people, predominantly from the Indian community. Most audience members are dressed in formal Indian clothes. The women wear colourful silk *saris* and younger girls wear sparkling *lehengas*[197] or

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[196] Traditional Indian men's garment, consisting of a knee-length shirt and loose-fitting pyjama pants
[197] Fancy blouse and full length skirt, accompanied by a matching scarf

salwar kameez ornamented with gold embroidery, shiny beads and sequins. A few men, including Vidya's husband, father and brother, wear *kurta pyjamas*, although the majority of men are wearing suit jackets. Some women crowd together in the aisles, greeting each other with hugs and catching up. *Haven't seen you in long time! How is your daughter? Is she still dancing?*

Once settled into their seats, a number of people begin leafing through the program brochures [see Figure 8] that have been handed out at the entrance. In the seat behind me, an elderly Indian woman is sitting beside a younger Canadian woman. I overhear the older woman explaining each type of dance in the program listed in the printed brochure. *This is the varnam. You know each line comes and she will show the expression. Then she will move into pure dance. You know I used to do all this dance, music. But of course, after marriage I stopped all these things.*

As the house lights dim, the audience settles and Vidya's husband, Bhushan, stands at the microphone downstage right. He welcomes the audience and says a few words about Vidya, announcing that this performance marks the beginning of her professional career as a dancer. Before the actual program begins, Bhushan invites Vidya's mother to the stage. She wears a formal silk *sari* in bright green and pink with rich gold embroidery and, replacing Bhushan at the microphone, she closes her eyes and sings an auspicious prayer. I hear voices in the audience whispering appreciation and admiration for her strong voice and touching sentiment. As she leaves the stage, the lights fade and I can hear the distant sound of Vidya's *ghunghroos* from behind the curtain. The audience murmurs quietly in anticipation, then falls silent as the curtain rises, revealing Vidya standing centre stage with arms

raised above her head, palms together in *anjali hasta*[198], eyes closed. The stage lights catch the sparkling jewels adorning Vidya's head and the shimmering gold threads of her silk costume. The music begins.

Slowly, confidently, Vidya glides from one pose to the next, her hands poised in crisp, clear *mudras*, her eyes bright as she communicates the poetry of her invocation to the silent audience. Each additional dance is introduced by an unseen MC, a past graduate of the Jai Govinda Dance Academy, speaking from offstage. She speaks clearly and confidently with a Canadian accent, perfectly enunciating the Sanskrit terms and names of Hindu deities. Illuminated by a spotlight, Vidya demonstrates the *mudras* for dance numbers with an *abhinaya* component, as the MC recites the translation. Following the invocation is the *pushpanjali*—a lively offering of flowers at the feet of *Krishna*, who is described through gesture as the divine flute player. With each step, Vidya's *ghunghroos* chime, accenting the rhythmic patterns of her footwork in perfect unison with the sound of the *mrdingam*. Next is the *jatiswaram*, and Vidya's movements are clear and sharp, forming strong lines and geometric patterns with her arms and legs. As the MC announces the *varnam*, there is a sudden rush of low whispering in the audience. The *varnam* is the *pièce de résistance* of an *arangetram* and the auditorium now vibrates with anticipation and expectation.

The lights come up, and Vidya stands at the back of the stage, poised and ready. As the music commences, Vidya remains standing perfectly still and begins her *attami*—slow, isolated movements of her neck—her eyes moving from right to left in unison with her head. With small, measured steps, she moves forward, beating

[198] A *mudra* signifying salutation or prayer

time with her right foot, each step creating a pulse with the sound of her *ghunghroos* as the clear voice of the male singer outlines the main poetic line. The voice of the *nattuvanar* takes over: "*talangu taka diku taka tadinginathom.*" Vidya turns out her feet and bends her knees, her decorative, embroidered fan skirt opening fully at the front of her costume as she forms the *ardha mandali* (half-sitting) stance, ready for the first *jati*.

Vidya begins to execute calculated, abstract movements and postures in time with the sharp ringing of finger cymbals and the driving, percussive strokes of the *mrdingam*. The rhythmic pattern begins slowly, deliberately, and then doubles in speed as Vidya moves to cover more of the stage floor. The speed doubles again and Vidya's *ghunghroos* match the tempo as her footwork increases in complexity. With a flourish, she strikes the final pose of the *theermanam*[199], completing the *jati*.

The singer takes over once more and the poetic lyrics of the composition begin. A striking visual contrast from the *jati*, Vidya's posture instantly softens. With subtle, graceful movements and stylized gestures, she embodies the *nāyikā*, miming the actions of preparing for the arrival of her beloved. Searching her closet for the perfect *sari* to wear, she selects one and carefully wraps the fabric around her body, delicately folding the pleats in the front. She adorns herself with jewels, wincing slightly in pain as she pushes her earrings through her earlobes. She continues to alternate between dynamic *jatis* and mimetic story telling, her face evoking the pain of separation and the desire for union with her love, her eyes anticipating, beckoning, pleading. The tempo increases, movements become more urgent, emotions run deeper until the music climaxes in a *theermanam* and Vidya strikes her final pose. The

[199] Sequence in which a rhythmic phrase is executed three times, often at the end of a *jati*.

auditorium erupts in enthusiastic applause. Vidya, breathing heavily from the exertion of dancing continuously for over half an hour, maintains her pose a moment longer before acknowledging the audience with a bow and exiting the stage.

The auditorium lights come up, and the audience moves into the lobby for the intermission. There is a buzz of excitement as everyone discusses the performance, particularly the *varnam* ... *Did you see her expression?* ... *Beautiful isn't it?* ... *Her mother must be so proud!* ...Within half an hour, we are back in our seats awaiting the second half of the program.

As the lights come up on the stage and the curtain rises, the crowd murmurs, admiring Vidya's new dance costume. Vidya demonstrates the *mudras* for her Kannada *padam*, "*Krishna nee begane*," as the MC recites the translation. The dance begins, and Vidya takes on the role of *Yashoda*, watching *Krishna* with adoration and beckoning him to come near her. With a quick spin, she becomes the mischievous child *Krishna*, sitting on the ground eating mud. Another spin transforms her back into *Yashoda*, angrily scolding the child. Spin right. *Krishna* sobs dramatically. Spin left. *Yashoda* orders *Krishna* to open his mouth. Spin right. *Krishna* leans back and slowly opens his mouth wide. Spin left. *Yashoda* swoons at the sight of the entire universe in *Krishna's* mouth. In the next *padam*, "*Yen palli kondiraiyya*," Vidya takes on even more characters as she depicts heroic episodes from the *Ramayana*, always returning back to the main character of the *Vishnu* devotee, asking rhetorically what has caused her Lord's fatigue. For the final dance, the *thillana*, Vidya returns to the highly rhythmic sequences of *nṛtta*, or pure, abstract Bharatanatyam. The program closes with a concluding prayer, *mangalam*, and Vidya steps in time with the music,

holding her palms together in *anjali hasta*, paying respect to God, her guru, and the audience before the exiting the stage to the sound of applause.

Vidya returns to the stage and is presented with a bouquet of flowers. She moves towards the microphone [see Figure 9], and thanks those who have helped and supported her throughout the process of planning and executing her *arangetram*, with special mention to the dancers and families of the Jai Govinda Dance Academy, as well as her own family. She calls her mother and father to the stage to thank them in person, receiving an affectionate hug from them [see Figures 10.1 and 10.2]. Finally she calls her guru, Jai Govinda, to the stage and expresses her heartfelt gratitude to him for teaching her "not just the form, but the very soul of Bharatanatyam" [see Figures 11.1 and 11.2]. Jai, in turn, congratulates Vidya and invites the audience to stay for the reception afterwards.

The audience returns to the lobby and congregates around a central table covered with large trays of *samosas*, rice, and *chana chaat*.[200] As they fill their plates, they socialize and discuss the performance, sharing their favourite moments from each dance. Before long, Vidya emerges from the corridor, still wearing her dance costume, but with a thin shawl draped around her shoulders. A number of people begin to applaud and crowd around Vidya, offering congratulations [see Figure 12]. Bharatanatyam dancers who have already completed their *arangetrams* hug Vidya enthusiastically, welcoming her as a fellow graduate of the Jai Govinda Dance Academy [see Figure 13]. Many audience members seek out Vidya's parents to congratulate them as well. Jai stands at the auditorium doorway and watches proudly as Vidya receives praise from the crowd. In a sense this performance serves as

[200] Savoury mixture with spiced chick peas.

reunion for a community of dance students and their families. Some of Jai's past students are in attendance, happy for the chance to see familiar faces and to watch Jai's up and coming student. Parents of Jai's beginner students have brought their daughters to meet Vidya and to show them where their dance training can lead.

5.2 ANALYSIS

As the *arangetram* performance is charged with social meaning, it cannot be disentangled from the event as a whole. It is therefore useful, I suggest, to analyse the entire *arangetram* event using a similar approach to that taken by Christopher Small in his exploration of the concept of "musicking." As Small expresses:

> If we widen the circle of our attention to take in the entire set of relationships that constitutes a performance, we shall see that music's primary meanings are not individual at all but *social*. Those social meanings are not to be hived off into something called a 'sociology' of music that is separate from the meaning of the sounds but are fundamental to an understanding of the activity that is called music [emphasis mine].[201]

Analysis of the *arangetram* reveals the complexity of the event itself in its capacity to serve multiple needs for diasporic Indian communities. The audience consists of the dancer's family and close friends, other dance students and their families, and members of the Indian community who often belong to cultural associations and actively attend diasporic performances of Indian dance and music. All of these people play key roles as social actors within the *arangetram* event, as their engagement with this "cultural performance" perpetuates the identification of an upper-middle class Indian community with artistic practices in the diaspora.

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[201] Small 1998, p. 8

Jai Govinda maintains traditional dance transmission methods at his dance academy, and is widely recognized for the high standard of his students' performances. Although Vidya had received some dance training in India prior to her arrival in Canada, Jai began training her privately as a beginner student, starting with basic technique and working up to repertoire. Vidya's *arangetram* performance thus reflected the technique and style of the Jai Govinda Dance Academy. The majority of audience members in this case were either connected to or familiar with the Jai Govinda Dance Academy, and expected this level of performance, as expressed in casual conversation before the program, during intermission and at the reception afterwards. In addition to Bharatanatyam technique, the *arangetram* encompasses religious elements and symbolic processes as observed in the presence of the altar onstage and the singing of an auspicious prayer before the dance performance. Many first-generation audience members were especially drawn to Vidya's *abhinaya*-based compositions because of their familiarity with the stories and characters drawn from Hindu literature. The *varnam* in particular was the most enthusiastically discussed dance item during the reception.

Thus, it can be observed that the *arangetram* performance itself comes to be integral to a wider net of social relations concurrently played out during the event. The cultural capital of Bharatanatyam is used to articulate social exchanges, as the audience members demonstrate their cultural awareness through verbal commentary on the performance, and thus reinforce their upper-middle class affiliation within the Indo-Canadian community. The event provides a space in which Indo-Canadian families can connect and build kinships. In addition, the *arangetram* setting provides

a means for families to display status and play out social hierarchies based on wealth within the diasporic community.

It is important to note, however, that the case study presented above is not typical of diasporic *arangetram* practice because of the unique position of the subject, Vidya Kotamraju. Unlike the majority of Jai's Bharatanatyam students, who are second-generation, Canadian-born children of Indian immigrants, Vidya is herself a new immigrant to Canada. As such, she is positioned somewhere between the younger generation of Indo-Canadians, and the older generation of established professional Indian immigrants that make up the diasporic Indian community. In the case of Vidya's *arangetram* there was a clear emphasis on the cultural capital of authenticity in Vidya's Bharatanatyam technique rather than the social capital of presenting a large-scale event. Numerous audience members commented on the fact that the performance hall and audience were smaller than those they had seen in most *arangetrams* previously attended in Vancouver, but expressed appreciation for the quality of the dance performance.

Through her involvement with the Jai Govinda Dance Academy, Vidya has been welcomed into a social space that has been created and sustained through years of diasporic artistic practices by a community of dancers—predominantly Canadian-born Indian girls. In this sense, Vidya's *arangetram* served a unique purpose. Not only did it maintain a space in which the Indo-Canadian community can experience Indian cultural practices in a setting far removed from the homeland, but it also served as an initiation for Vidya to secure her own place within the diasporic Indian community of Vancouver. This community was represented by the presence of the

audience at Vidya's *arangetram*. The core guest list consisted of dance students and families from the Jai Govinda Dance Academy. Because Jai's students' families come from many different areas of India, the friends that have accompanied them to this event are members of different regional Indian cultural associations. At the same time, Jai also invited mainstream dance professionals and supporters of the arts in Vancouver. All of these people came together to celebrate Vidya's accomplishment and the ongoing success of the Jai Govinda Dance Academy in sustaining the artistic and cultural practices of the diasporic Indian community.

Figure 4.1. Bindu Boggaram prepares the altar

Figure 4.2. The finished altar onstage

Figure 5. Jai Govinda applies Vidya Kotamraju's make-up

Figure 6. Jai Govinda adjusts Vidya Kotamraju's costume and jewelry

Figure 7. Rena Boggaram touches up Vidya Kotamraju's make-up

Figure 8.1. Vidya Kotamraju's *arangetram* program brochure (front cover)

Figure 8.2. Vidya Kotamraju's *arangetram* program brochure (inside cover)

Figure 8.3. Vidya Kotamraju's *arangetram* program brochure (back cover)

Figure 9. Vidya Kotamraju addresses the audience after her *arangetram* performance

Figure 10.1. Vidya Kotamraju calls her parents to the stage

Figure 10.2. Vidya Kotamraju thanks her parents

Figure 11.1. Vidya Kotamraju calls her guru, Jai Govinda, to the stage

Figure 11.2. Vidya Kotamraju thanks her guru, Jai Govinda

Figure 12. Audience members congratulate Vidya Kotamraju during the reception

Figure 13. Rena Boggaram (right), a graduate of the Jai Govinda Dance Academy, congratulates Vidya Kotamraju (left) after her *arangetram*

CONCLUSION

This study suggests that Bharatanatyam practice serves multiple functions within the Indian diaspora of Canada. A predominant trend is the tendency for first-generation Indian immigrant parents to send their daughters for dance training as a means for connecting with their cultural background. This is often motivated by anxiety that second-generation Indian youth will grow up without exposure to Indian culture due to their immersion in western culture and constant association with Canadian youth. In addition, it has been observed that an education in cultural and religious practices does not figure prominently in the home environment of diasporic Indian families. There is a general expectation among parents that their daughters will perform dance publicly, both in mainstream artistic venues and for community events held by regional Indian cultural associations. Such opportunities to display knowledge of artistic traditions provide a significant sense of social validation for a dancer and especially for her parents within the Indo-Canadian community.

Bharatanatyam is highly gendered art form with dance movements and postures specifically assigned as masculine and feminine. With the predominance of female performers, the majority of dance compositions depict female characters and sentiments, though the compositions themselves are, for the most part, historically created by male poets, composers and choreographers. Thus, in learning Bharatanatyam, dance students are taught embodied codes of Indian feminine behaviour that have been established in dance theory and practice. Through the process of portraying female characters, Indo-Canadian students of Bharatanatyam consequently embody social values attached to this feminine ideal, resulting in a new

learned behaviour that emerges as a significant element of an Indo-Canadian girl's sense of Indian identity.

Analysis of the *arangetram* reveals the complexity of the event itself in its capacity to serve multiple needs for diasporic Indian communities. From an artistic standpoint, the *arangetram* involves the preparation and performance of a complete *margam* that showcases a broad spectrum of Bharatanatyam technique—from abstract, rhythmic sequences to expressive, mimetic storytelling. Thus, the performance functions as a sort of examination after years of training, and validates the teacher as well as the student in the presence of a predominantly Indo-Canadian audience consisting of the dancer's family and friends, as well as members of the larger Indian community. At the same time, all of these people engage with the "cultural performance" that is *arangetram* as a way to play out and reinforce their upper-middle class affiliation within the Indian diaspora and also to forge collective bonds that enable them to situate themselves as a community within their host society. In this respect, while the dancer and the teacher display their cultural capital and thereby situate themselves as social actors within the community through the *arangetram* performance, members of the Indo-Canadian audience do so through markers of cultural awareness such as aesthetic evaluations and verbal commentary as well as through social interaction.

Particularly significant to cultural memory is the presence of *abhinaya* or expression-based compositions as part of the content of the *arangetram* dance performance, in which the dancer portrays characters and stories drawn from Hindu literature as well as embodied codes of constructed ethnicized and gendered

behaviour. This provides the first-generation immigrant audience with the visual experience of a remembered past that is brought to life through the recognizable narrative content of *arangetram* performance, thus creating a perceived connection to the distant homeland. Younger girls of the second-generation are brought to the event to catch a glimpse of what their future as diasporic individuals may hold, as they themselves are encouraged to take up artistic cultural practices.

There emerges, however, a conflict between the cultural capital of authenticity in *arangetram* performance and the social capital of publicly displaying wealth through *arangetram* presentation. The emphasis placed on performance among parents of second-generation Bharatanatyam students leads to concerns of authenticity and debate among dance teachers and students over the validity of non-classical dance forms. This has resulted in a divide between the realms of professional and amateur dance, which are driven by cultural and social concerns respectively. On one level, Bharatanatyam teachers and institutions gain cultural capital through the maintenance of traditional transmission and performance practice. Such teachers pride themselves on the recognition that their students receive when they present *arangetrams* for knowledgeable audiences of visiting artists and connoisseurs from India. In addition, they are invested in maintaining professional dance production companies, in which their students can continue Bharatanatyam performance at a higher level beyond the completion of their *arangetrams*. However, the cultural capital of achieving a professional level of Bharatanatyam performance does not necessarily serve the social needs of the diasporic community at large, which places more emphasis on education and professional careers due to parental and societal

expectations of second-generation youth. As a result, a second level of amateur Bharatanatyam dance practice emerges, in which teachers, students and parents are less concerned with authenticity in performance and more invested in the social capital of holding lavish, large-scale *arangetrams*, with the dance performance itself taking a secondary place to the social aspects of the event. It has been observed that the vast majority of students presenting these *arangetrams* cease their dance training and performing immediately following the event, in order to pursue higher education and careers.

As a result of this divide within Bharatanatyam dance communities of Canada, there emerges a group of second-generation Indian girls who feel a strong sense of obligation to uphold the authenticity of their classical artistic practices. Through their engagement with Bharatanatyam, these girls construct and perform an ethnicized identity that they often perceive to be more "traditional" than that of youth currently living in India, who are heavily influenced by Bollywood and popular culture. Second-generation Bharatanatyam students also often experience a mixed sense of both belonging and alienation when visiting India, as well as through interaction with their Indo-Canadian peers who are not involved with Bharatanatyam or other Indian cultural practices. Their Bharatanatyam dance studios and academies serve as constructed social spaces in which these students can find a common ground and relate to each other through their shared experience of learning and performing classical Indian dance.

Considering the position of these Bharatanatyam students outside the dance studio, there is an array of perspectives among participants and academics alike

relating to the construction of identity—whether perceived, assigned, or performed. It was from this point that I initially set out to explore how assignations of difference play into the construction of identity among second-generation Indian girls attending Bharatanatyam classes. However, upon further examination of individuals engaging in diverse cultural practices, using the concept of "sameness" as an analytical tool, it has emerged that while much discourse on diasporic individuals often focuses on a hybrid identity that fuses opposing cultural experiences, in practice these individuals experience an integrated, yet composite, sense of identity, and can therefore feel at home in various diverse cultural settings without any perceived need to mediate between opposing identities. As such, I propose that the examination of "identity" alone is not sufficient as a theoretical framework here, but rather exploration of behaviour, practice and social interaction provides more insight into the function of expressive culture in diasporic communities. A theoretical shift from identity to practical engagement reveals contradictions between discourse and actual practice among diasporic individuals, and would thus be an effective approach in future ethnomusicological scholarship.

It is only in recent years that some children of second-generation Indians have begun to take up dance classes in Canada, often under the same gurus that taught their mothers. This turnover suggests the imminent passing on of teaching practice from established gurus to their advanced and able students. The future of Bharatanatyam practice in Canada remains unclear, as second-generation youth will likely only take up teaching practice as a secondary career, due to familial and societal expectations. New issues in constructing Indo-Canadian identity will likely surface among third-

generation youth, who are even further removed from the homeland than their parents were. At the same time, their second-generation mothers will have experienced strong cultural ties to the homeland through their engagement with Bharatanatyam during their youth.

It remains to be seen how preoccupation with displaying wealth and social status may play into future practice of *arangetram*. It has already been observed that there is a growing trend among diasporic families to host lavish and costly *arangetrams* in which the dance performance itself takes a secondary position to the main function of the *arangetram* as a social event. However, a number of dance teachers have successfully maintained classical dance practice in the diaspora through their continuous use of transmission methods based on the *guru-shishya* model from India. If their students are able to continue this standard of dance transmission for the next generation, it is conceivable that *arangetram* practice will continue, with audiences becoming more populated with Canadian-born second-generation parents and third-generation youth. In this case, the performance itself would evoke a different sort of cultural memory for the audience, as the actions and sentiments depicted in the dances would become further removed from the lived experience of diasporic Indians. Rather than referring to past experiences in India (as with first-generation Indian immigrants), Canadian-born Indians, through their involvement with cultural associations and artistic practices, could instead consider the site of diasporic cultural performance as their new point of reference for experieneing Indian tradition and culture. This appears to be a likely development as Indo-Canadian girls ascend the Canadian stage of the future, due to the increasing importance placed upon

maintaining tradition through sustained artistic and cultural practices of diasporic Indian communities.

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